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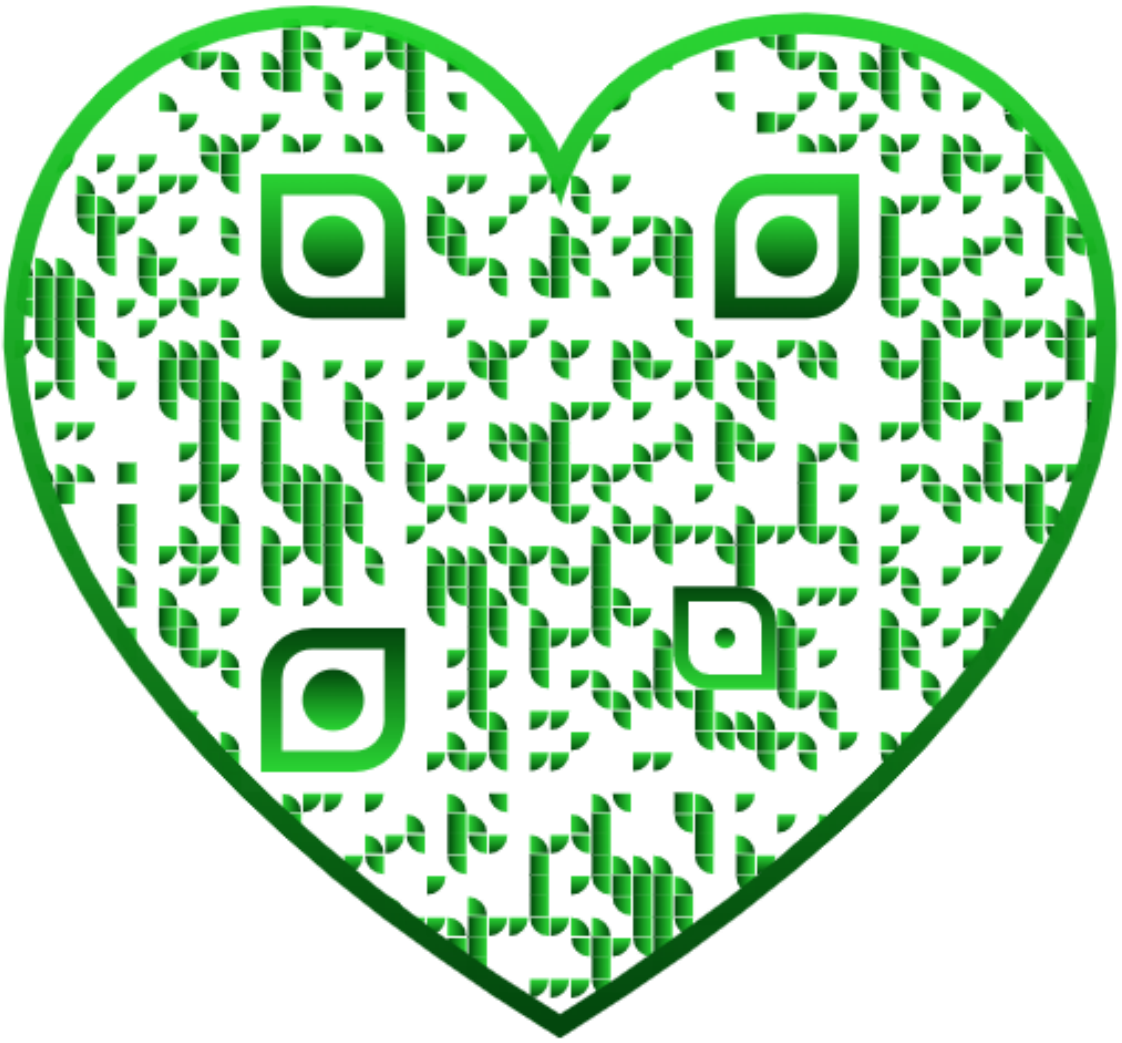

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WINNER: EXCELLENCE IN RACK BUILDING AND DESIGN
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The room is a unique and elegant space, yet features state-of-the-art entertainment immersion, including award-winning Elementi Audio, Fortress Seating with D-BOX motion control, and world-class equipment from Lumagen, Screen Research, Christie Digital and StormAudio.

The team at Wavetrain Cinemas continues to create unmatched cinematic experiences, with these latest awards confirming them as global industry leaders for cutting-edge home cinema design and innovation.

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Give it time

Hi-fi needs time like vinyl needs urine.

Among our dozens of award-winners in this special issue of *Sound+Image*, it's especially great to see the vinyl spinners and accessories and phono stages: categories that faded away in the earlier years of our awards, but which are now driving the hi-fi industry in all the right ways — the attraction of vinyl is bringing new listeners, younger listeners, while simultaneously promoting the idea of attentive listening.

Vinyl almost forces you into good listening habits, because given the cash we splash these days, we are likely to sit down and listen with attention to our purchase, in the order the artist selected, of course, and hopefully in hi-fi quality.

It's sometimes frustrating that this doesn't happen more often with music. When you sit down to watch TV for an hour-long show, you pretty much plan to do nothing else for that hour, true? Or perhaps these days you'll be second-screening, a phone or tablet in hand to look up an actor on IMDB, or to check email and socials and news while watching the TV. So you missed that glorious tracking shot over the railway viaduct, but you heard most of the dialogue, so you get the gist of the show. But that's an incomplete way to appreciate art.

When you sit down to listen to music… well, I'll stop right there, because *do* you sit down to listen to music? Since you're reading the comment piece of an audio magazine, there's a good chance I'm preaching to the converted, and you will answer 'yes'. Although that's perhaps surrendering to a tendency to think that critical listening is the act of old-school hi-fi fans, who do it right, while today's younger listeners are all on smartphones and shared Spotify playlists.

That's not true, of course. Sharing music is a crucial characteristic of youth identity in every generation; you can bet that Taylor Swift fans gather together to play her latest releases, and hopefully not only by sharing earbuds; I reckon hosting rights for a Tay-Tay party will favour homes where the parents have a good hi-fi system — and especially a turntable. Taylor Swift has been dominating the ever-rising vinyl sales as much as she's dominated everything else of late, including stimulating our Australian economy so that all teen bank accounts have now been emptied on Tay-Tay tix and spangly merch, leaving nobody with any money left to go to Splendour in the Grass.

Tay-Tay certainly tempts her fanbase with vinyl goodies, though the multiple variants are almost predatory. Billie Eilish recently took a swipe at artists who release vinyl versions to excess and with minimal differentiation. While she wasn't singling anyone out, it was widely interpreted as a swipe at Swift, whose latest album 'The Tortured Poets Department' is arriving as we go to press in four $70 special editions, each with one unique bonus track. 'Midnights' also came out in four vinyl versions, and if you bought them all, then the back covers, with the addition of a kit from her website, could be turned into a clock. Excess? It's like the 1970s never went away.

Eilish's main point, beside it blocking the presses for lesser artists, is that it's just outright wasteful. She's a lifelong sustainability seeker, and while she herself released eight different vinyl versions of 'Happier Than Ever', all were made from 100% recycled black vinyl with the colours coming from recycled ingredients. Even the shrink wrap was made from sugar cane.

But our vinyl records are, worryingly, an oil-based product. The PVC of modern vinyl is a bit less than half carbon, derived from oil and gas via ethylene. Then again, if we never burn our records, we're effectively trapping that carbon in solid form, thereby keeping it safe from the atmosphere at least as long as we keep our vinyl collections intact, which for our hi-fi-loving readers we can safely assume will be all eternity. We might save the planet this way, trapping all excess carbon in vinyl form. Burning your records is very ill-advised anyway, since breathing ethylene can apparently cause confusion and unconsciousness.

So vinyl is oil-based, yet in its way the humble LP is doing its bit to save the world. And who could argue with Australian punk band Private Function, which also used 'recyclable' products for a limited edition LP last year. Working with Salty Dog Records, they released 50 units of a yellow vinyl album that was made with buckets of their own urine in the vinyl mix. Now that's rock-n-roll!

Cheers!

Jez Ford, Editor *jez.ford@futurenet.com*

DALL·E 3 VIA COPILOT

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April-May 2024

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The Hi-Fi Headlines

LEN WALLIS AUDIO®

NEWSLETTER NO.267

What's new at Len Wallis Audio.

Revival Audio Atalante 4 speakers.

This industries hottest new release in decades has been Revival Audios speakers out of France. Their Atalante 3 and Atalante 5 models have been an extraordinary success – winning awards and garnering glowing awards worldwide.

We have just received their new Atalante 4. This largish floor-standing speaker is a departure from the earlier models in this range, which are both stand-mount speakers (albeit the Atalante 5 is a large example of the genre). The Atalante 4 also exhibits a slight departure sonically.

First and foremost, this is an excellent loudspeaker, one that offers exceptional value at $7,700. During my initial listening sessions I found myself making mental comparisons with speakers costing three times as much!

The Atalante 4's displays all the hallmarks that have made the '3 and '5 so desirable – including their meticulous approach to build quality. Their much lauded 'imagery' is evident, as is their sense of tonal 'balance'.

Where I do find the Atalante 4 a slight departure sonically is the pure grandeur of the performance. This speaker presents a very large, and very involving, sound field. While not losing any of the pin-point imagery that Revival is renowned for the Atalante 4's creates a sound stage extending way beyond the speakers themselves. While they will work in a smallish room (my listening was done in a room 5mts x 3.5mts) they will easily fill a far larger listening environment.

You are going to hear a lot more about the Atalante 4 in the coming years – value such as this does not come our way often.

....And speaking of value for money:

This month (April) we will receive our final shipment of the Rega Planar 3 50th Anniversary Edition turntable. Based on the ever-popular Rega Planar 3, this limited-edition turntable is now out of production. The Panar 3 50th is much more than a fancy commemorative badge (although it does have one). Firstly, it has a distinctive walnut plinth. It is supplied with a Neo PSU Mk2 external power supply (normally a $549 option), the reference EBLT belt, a custom manufactured CNC'd aluminum drive pulley and comes fitted with their Exact moving magnet cartridge ($650).
The Planar 3 50th Edition is selling for $1,899, only $450 than the current Rega Planar 3 (without cartridge). This is exceptional value for money, particularly considering the value already offered by the turntable it is based on.

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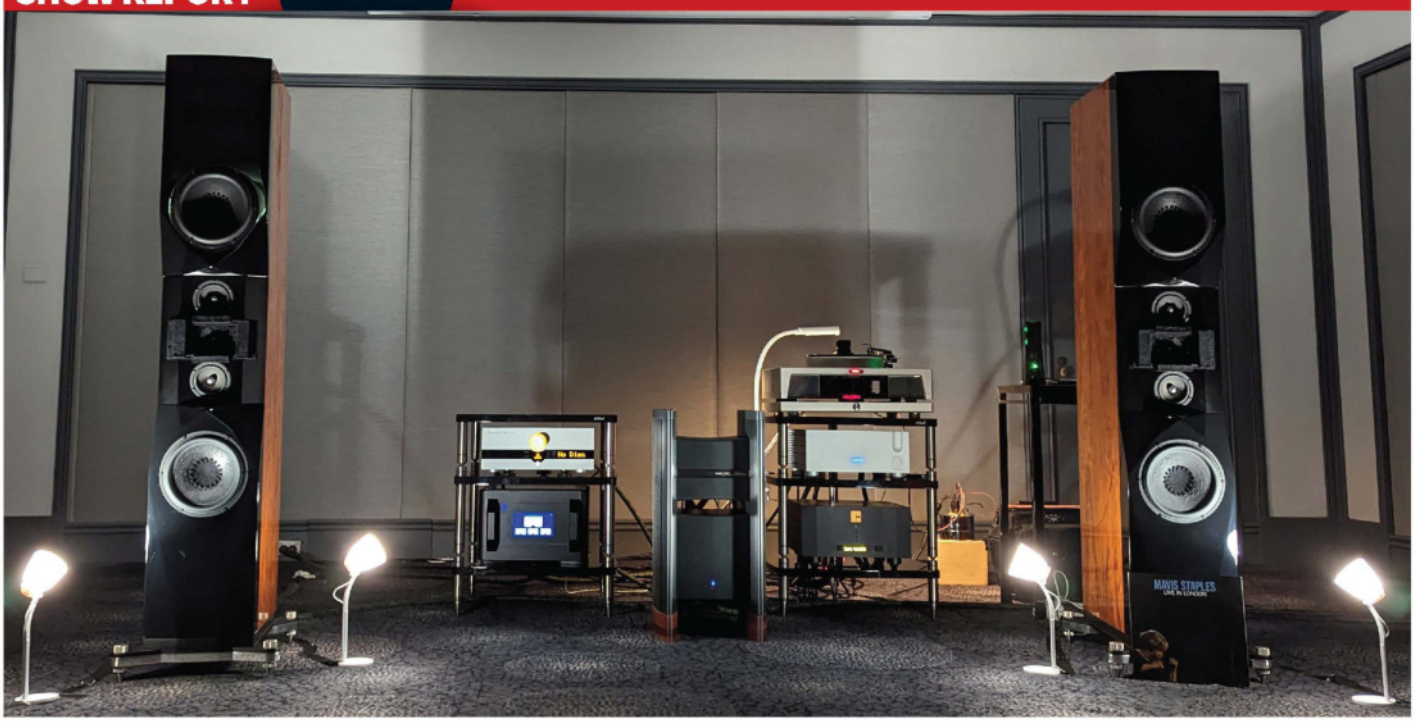
Australian Hi-Fi Show 2024

Sydney's audio and AV show has never sounded better

Not many things would have descended on Sydney in greater numbers than millimetres of rainfall on the weekend (150mm over 24 hours!), but hi-fi brands were certainly one of them. After a successful inaugural event last April, the Australian Hi-Fi Show 2024 returned to the Sydney Central Hotel to give Sydneysider entertainment fans and audiophiles the opportunity to see and hear some of the best audio and AV products from Australia and all over the world.

Brought to you by *Australian Hi-Fi*, *What Hi-Fi?* and *Sound+Image* magazines from Future Publishing, the three-day celebration of hi-fi and home cinema featured nearly 30 rooms of kit, which included an all-Aussie super system, luscious AlsyVox ribbon speakers from Italy that delivered mind-blowing sound and got everyone talking, and even the latest Avantgarde Acoustics horn loudspeaker system shipped in from Germany ahead of its official unveiling at the renowned High End Munich show in May.

If you couldn't weather the storm to get there (and the sun shone through Saturday and Sunday), don't fret — the showfloor highlights can be found here, so you can at least see and read what sonic heaven looked like, and get an idea of which demos to chase at your local retailer as the winter months draw in. And hey, there'll always be next year!



▲ Duntech, Döhmann & Halcro

Mezzanine

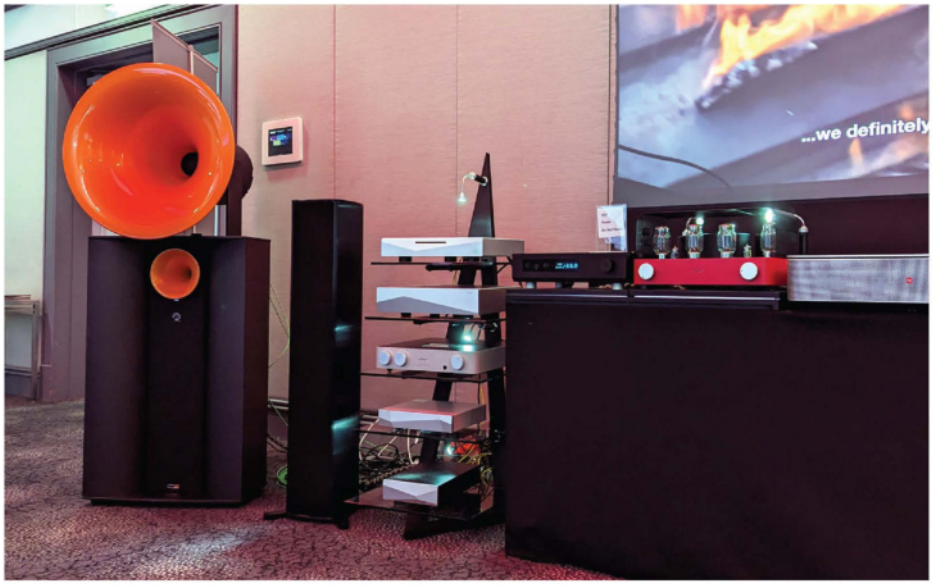
Duntech, Döhmann & Halcro were together at last in the furthest first-floor mezzanine ballroom. Ever wondered how your music collection would sound through a system costing the equivalent of five Teslas? The Three Aus-keteers treated show attendees to a demo of a near-million-dollar supersystem that sounded like, well, a million dollars. Duntech's two-metre-tall Princess loudspeakers took the helm, flying the flag for the company's 'Prime Directives' design ethos, and were driven by Halcro's new stereo version of its legendary Eclipse amplifier, which *Audio Esoterica* magazine recently heralded as one of the best-sounding amplifiers in the world. These talents were fed by another in Döhmann's equally-renowned Helix One turntable, featuring a new Supatrac Blackbird tonearm whose revolutionary patented 'Sideways Uni-Pivot Arm' bearing is, if you ask us, worth further reading. Mavis Staple's 2019 'Live in London' LP was the highlight of one particular demonstration, with the system utterly nailing the recording's wonderful Union Chapel, London sonics.

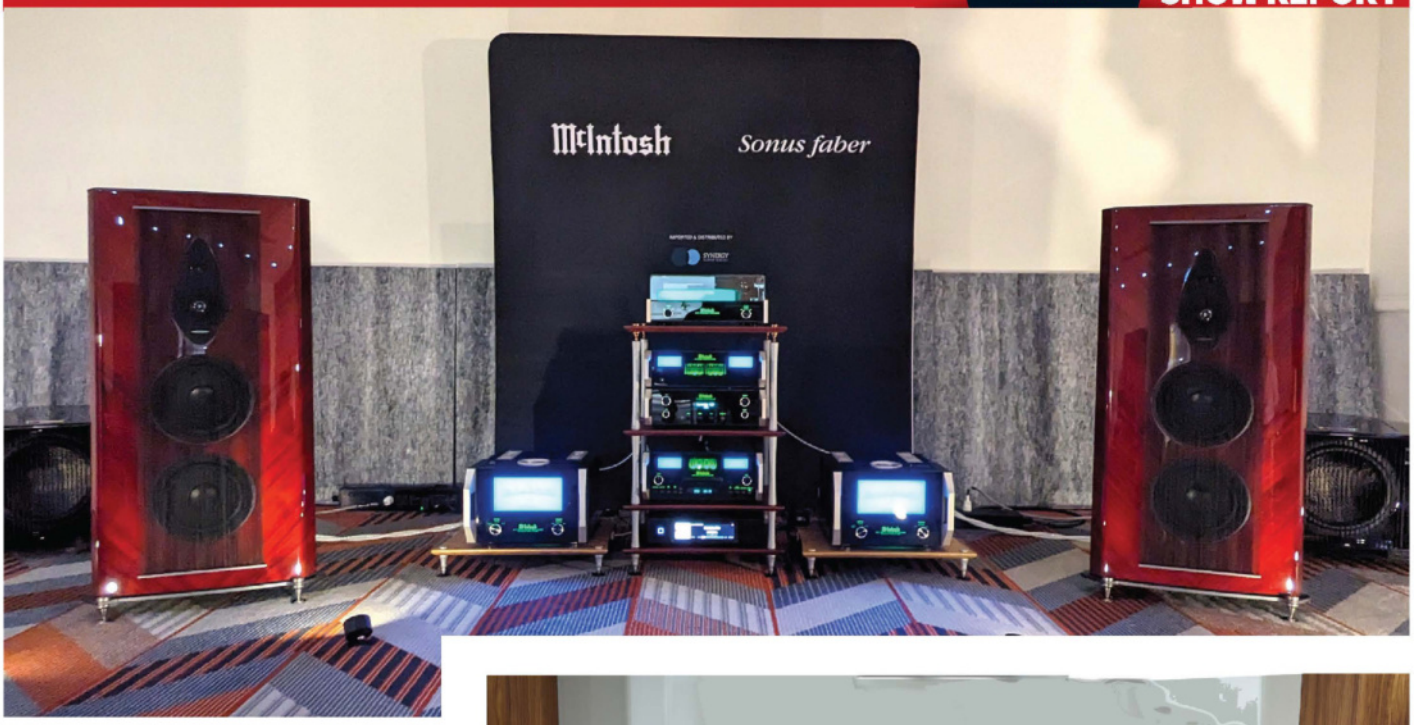
Wavetrain Cinemas & BenQ were together in a large mezzanine ballroom, showing a $80,000 set-up from related Australian brand Elementi comprising LCR and surround speakers (Firebird, Firefly), subwoofers (Obsidian), and amplification (Tungsten, Magnesium) located close to the speakers in vertical enclosures to reduce cable lengths and consequent interference, plus a Severtson Impression Series screen, Lumagen Radiance Pro video processor and BenQ's brand-new W5800 laser projector. And boy, was it a showstopper! *Barbie* showed off the BenQ's rich colour palette, *No Time To Die* reassured that it could 'do natural' while being a glossy double-page advert for Elementi sound, and the final *The Greatest Showman* demo clip sealed the deal (and won our Editor's vote for Best Sound of the whole Show). For anyone umming and ahhing over turning their nest-flown teenager's room into a dream home cinema, here's the answer!

Maxmedia brought Avantgarde Audio's all-new Mezzo G3 active loudspeaker system (powered by its own iTRON power amplifier), landing Down Under in time for the show ahead of its official launch at the High End Munich show next month, dazzling not only with its orange horns but its equally beguiling performance, not least its pin-point-precise stereo imaging when fed trip-hop electronica by the connected COS D10 streaming DAC/preamp. Less orange but no less impressive was another Maxmedia brand showcase in the Innuous Pulse player, Fezz Audio's tube Equinox DAC and Titania stereo amp driving Piega speakers, their rendition of Annie Lennox's *Put A Spell On You* an early show highlight! And lest we forget the brightest corner of the room — Leica's award-winning Cine 1 Cinema TV doubled up on both home cinema and information display duties, showing how its Leica glass and bigscreen projection laughs in the face of ambient light.

Beyerdynamic headphones from Australian distributor Synchronised Technology were many a visitors' first post-registration stop, loaded with award-winning and best-in-class cans from the German brand's diverse, budget-spanning catalogue — including the brand-new (but numbers-

▼ Maxmedia





▲ Synergy Audio Visual

limited) DT 770 Pro X Limited Edition cans, bringing tech from the company's higher price points down to a $349 headphone. Not a bad way to start your audio show experience!

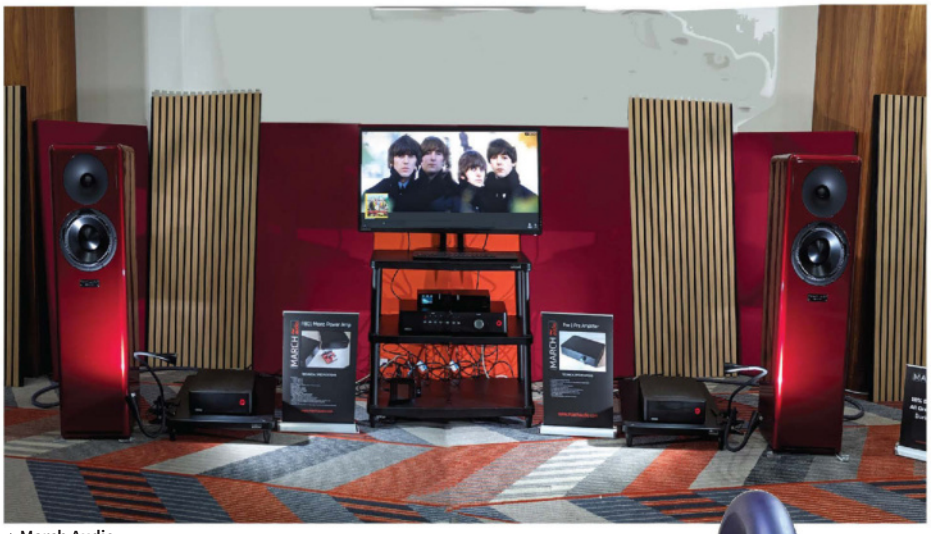
Boomerang Records

If Beyerdynamic was a first stop for visitors, the adjacent vinyl racks from Boomerang Records were everyone's essential last stop to load up on "just a couple" of takeaways from the Sydney store's trove of the black stuff, while exchanging collectors' stories with Boomerang's endlessly knowledgeable team (though we did have a word about Led Zeppelin being filed under 'Metal'). Our editor betrayed his prog leanings by snatching up a rare Fish/Tony Banks 12-incher, though also a more respectable (especially for a Brit) Masters Apprentices compilation.

Ground Floor

Synergy Audio Visual brought Sonus faber's Stradivari sequel, celebrating the brand's 40th anniversary; it made a thrilling — and lasting — impression at the Australian Hi-Fi Show, aptly paired with McIntosh's MC1.25KW monos, 1200 Series digital components and MT5 turntable, as Aurender's N20 streamer brought the sweet streams and REL's huge No.32 subs jacked up the lowest end. An enthralling rendition of Meute's *You & Me*, particularly as the techno brass brand's chorus horns come in, while the Stradivari's imaging and sub integration were touted using Gojira's *Drum Solo*.

The Synergy room's more accessible, 'real-world' system saw Advance Paris and ever-reliable ELAC join forces, while an all-Rega system fronted by the new Aya speakers gave visitors good reason to revisit!



▲ March Audio

▲ Avation

March Audio battled flooded highways and even survived an outback emu incident in order to drive their Ukkonen AWG floorstanders and themselves down to Sydney from Albany, WA, their system driven this time by March's new Pre1 preamp and PuriFi-based flagship P801 power amp. March Audio once again demonstrated how spectacular sound doesn't have to cost the earth. And if you made the most of the 10% discount the company offered at the show, then congratulations on your latest bargain!

▲ Masimo Consumer on the Lower Ground, with Classé driving Bowers & Wilkins

▲ Indie Hi-Fi's single-seat demo on the Lower Ground: Grimm, AGD and Wilson Audio

Avation flouted the fashion rule that 'blue and green should never be seen unless there's a colour in between'; it clearly does not apply to Vivid Audio's side-side-by-side positioning of its Kaya S12 (green) and Giya G2, which looked gorgeous next to one another in Avation's room. The former, hooked up to a Lumin P1 streamer, the Jeff Rowland Capri preamp and PS Audio BHK M600 monos, sounded just as sonically pleasing as it looked visually, despite its large environment.

Lower Ground

Masimo Consumer had two spaces here, following up the Bowers & Wilkins 700 Series speaker demo on floor nine with the 801 D4 representative of the all-singing-all-dancing 800 Diamond Signature Series. Alongside high-end Classe Delta pre and power amplification fed, naturally, by the Marantz 30n player (a Denon turntable was there to tag-team) and connected by AudioQuest, the new 800 did what they do best — highly insightful, dynamically expressive, tonally-straight-down-the-middle renditions. You wouldn't have heard Leonard Cohen's vocal in *You Want It Darker* quite like that elsewhere, nor *Heart Of the Sunrise* held so tight despite us being rather free with the volume control.

Across the corridor was another B&W speaker series with 800 Diamond-levels of fame: the affordable — and ever-brilliant in its eighth generation — 600 Series, paired with Marantz's PM7000N streaming amplifier. And ensuring no visitor was left short of demonstrations to choose from in Masimo's lower ground floor representation, Polk speakers and Denon electronics formed an accessible rock'n'roll-friendly pairing.

Indie Hi-Fi's single-seat (!) demo sat the listener before Wilson Audio SabrinaX speakers, a Grimm Audio MU1 streamer (and Roon server) and AGD Productions' Andante DAC/preamp and Audion mono amps. This system indeed deserved to be heard in that close sweet-spot, and sweet it did sound.

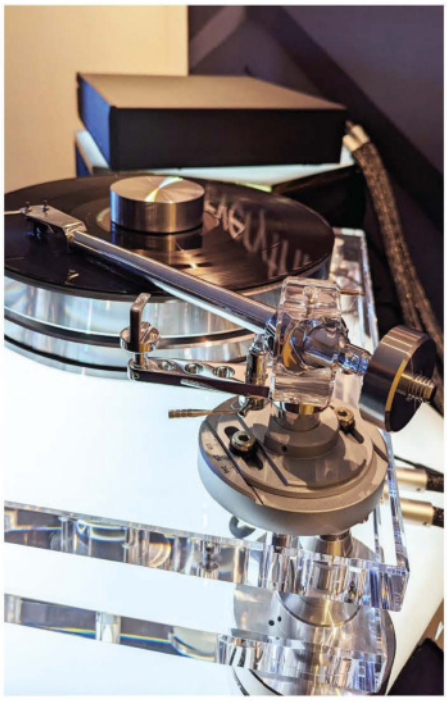
It would've been pretty bold of you to occupy that room for more than 15 minutes, but you could easily have spent hours in Indie Hi-Fi's other room, which thankfully catered for a few more bodies — specifically head-fi fans, who had before them a veritable selection of personal listening gear: we had sessions under the Meze Audio Empyrean II and ZMF Calderas, each around $5500, driven by an impressive three-strong Holo Audio stack, and ended up being cosseted by the lightning-fast utterly-open $5500 RAAL-requisite ribbon headphones. Exquisite!

Level 9

Secret Chord Analogue's often-packed Room 901 included demonstrations of the "world's finest vinyl record cleaning method", Record Restore, while music was flowing from 15-inch open-baffle Confluence Decor-series speakers driven, on our visit, by neat little red-fronted RedRoo electronics, the SE5 tube amplifier and PR5 Tube Phono Preamp. Designed by Phil Wait, former staff engineer at Electronics Today International magazine, these RedRoos are available in kit form at a couple of levels, including completed circuit boards that require "little more than a screwdriver" to construct, Phil told us.

Audio Marketing brought the latest release in the successful Revival Audio Atalante loudspeaker range from France, the new Atalante 4 sounding super-clean in a rather more conventional tower-like design rather than the wonderful width of the first two giant standmounts, yet with the same Atalante engineering and French-built design details. The speakers were generously powered by the 550W Musical Fidelity M8xi super-integrated amplifier, while the source topping the stack was MF's acrylic aesthetic wonder, the $18k M8xTT turntable (below) which was playing, among others, the LPs issued by inakustic, whose giant cables linked all components.

▼ Audio Marketing: Musical FIdelity M8xTT turntable



Microphase Audio Design (M.A.D. speakers) are renowned for their extraordinary clean midrange, certainly demonstrated up in Room 903 but newly supplemented by the more significant bass performance of the latest Tower 4 design, now the highest level of the brand's iteratively expanded speakers. This is the first to introduce an MTM-arranged pair of 13cm midrange drivers flanking the tweeter, while below are twin active 10-inch bass drivers in a push-pull arrangement, each powered by a 150W MosFet amplifier. From an eclectic collection of electronics on hand, MAD's Jean-Marie Liere was using a classic Quad 606 amplifier to drive the Tower 4s, which were most definitely on song, our favourite being a thrilling delivery of London Grammar's *Hey Now*.

▲ Yamaha Music Australia's 5000 Series system complete with turntable and bonus 3000 Series CD player

Yamaha Music Australia had two rooms up on the 9th floor, the first pairing the company's 2000 Series hi-fi with the NS-2000A floorstanding speakers in their Yamaha true piano-black gloss, and everything on Les Davis Entropic Isolators. We suffered through a visitor's choice of Simply Red, the system ruthlessly revealing its 80s' appallingness, before the demonstrator took mercy and switched to two gorgeous slices of Lana Del Rey in *The Grants* and *A&W*, thus reassuring us as to the enveloping True Sound abilities of the 2000 Series.

Next door Yamaha had the 5000 Series hi-fi system, and no such reassurance was required there, even though the Giant & Tremendous turntable wasn't initially being used in this usually all-analogue system (it arrived late), so that we instead enjoyed (greatly) the 5000 Series pre-power and speakers' abilities fed by a 3000 Series CD player and Tidal stream.

Yamaha also brought the biggest prize of the show: a pair of the YH-5000SE orthodynamic headphones, valued at $7499, so the room held a regular flow of competition entrants getting their cards initialled and their entries assured. Winners will soon be revealed!

Masimo Consumer's many brands were spread liberally across the Show, with the ninth floor hosting a dynamite demo of the latest Signature edition from Bowers & Wilkins, the 702 S3 Signature with luxurious Datuk Gloss finish, internal upgrades and just a little gold bling trim. Driving the system was the Marantz Model 50 amplifier, with the newly award-winning CD 50n spinning CDs and streaming, plus the calming influence of a Furman power conditioner. Top tunes during our visit included Joshua Bell's *Slavonic Fantasy in B minor* and Beats Antiques' *Surges*.

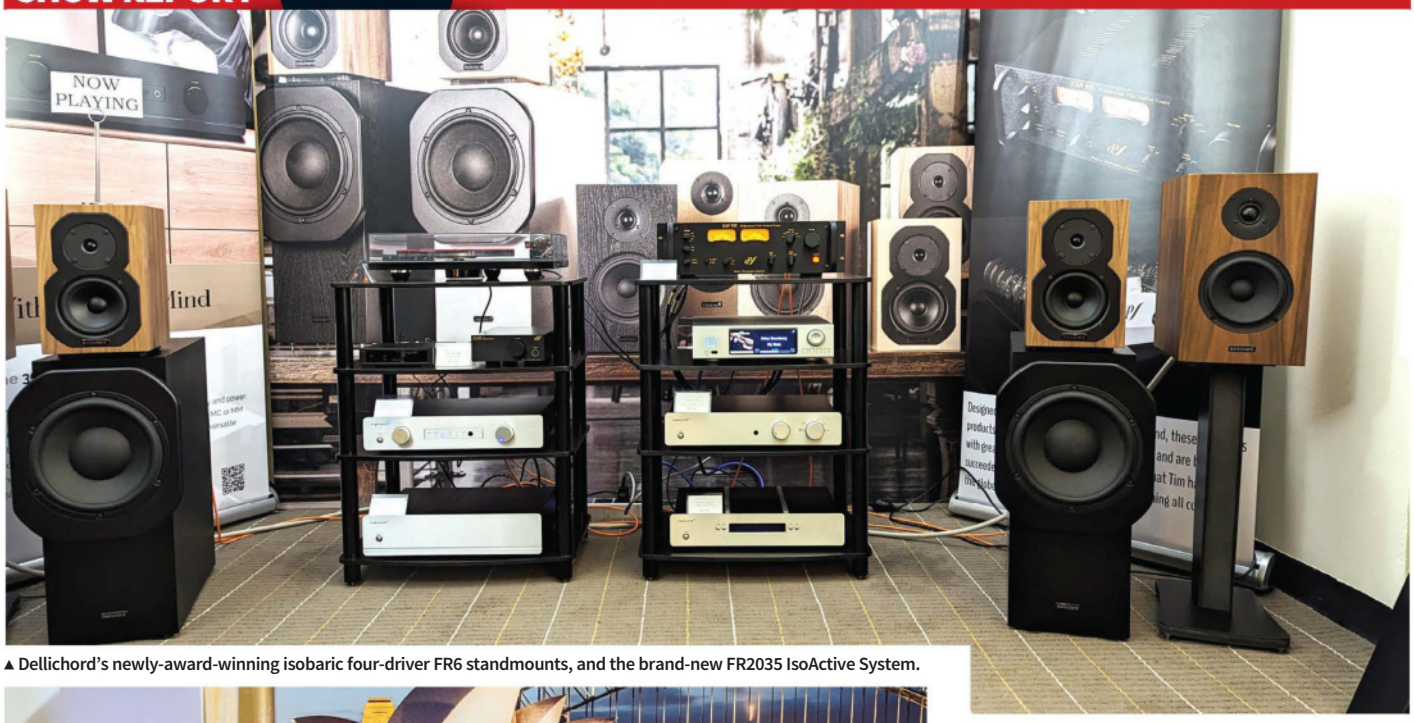
Audio Magic and **Krispy Audio** shared Room 907, and delivered one of our very favourite-sounding rooms (though the coveted Best Sound of Show is chosen by public vote). The cunningly-chamfered Kudos Audio Titan 808 speakers were effortlessly rolling out the tunes under the command of Copland's CTA407 integrated tube amplifier, almost invisible in black at the top of one rack,

▲ Microphase Audio Design, its range building now to the new Tower 4s

▲ DEQX's new LS200 processor/amp driving Serhan Swift's new mu3F floorstanders

▲ Sennheiser Hearing: everything from listening buds to audiophile over-ears

▲ Masimo Consumer: Marantz electronics driving Bowers & Wilkins 702 S3 Signatures



▲ Dellichord's newly-award-winning isobaric four-driver FR6 standmounts, and the brand-new FR2035 IsoActive System.

▲ Richter played its new Wizard S6Plus against its Merlin standmounts – and a pair of its LCR Unicorn 'centre' speakers!

while a VPI Scout turntable topped the other, above the very new Manley Oasis phono stage from California, which replaces the previous highly-regarded Chinook. Digital tunes came from the versatile Lumin P1 streamer, DAC and pre-amplifier. Glorious.

Audio Magic teamed with **Space Hi-Fi** for its second show room. It's always a pleasure to relax in front of a pair of Harbeth speakers, here the Super HL5 Plus XD model with their Harbeth-made 200mm RADIAL2 bass/mid driver, and connected with Ultra Black II Tellurium cables (which Space Hi-Fi is currently including for free with the speakers). Johnnie Bergmann's very black air-bearing turntable from Denmark wasn't playing when we visited, but we greatly enjoyed digital tunes served from Aqua's LinQ network interface Formula xHD DAC, playing through an Ayre pre-power combo of KX-5 Twenty preamp and VX-5 Twenty fully-discrete, fully-balanced, zero-feedback power amp.

Mcleans Smarter Home Entertainment always provides a darkened listening haven, this year equipped with Devore Fidelity Orangutan O/96 speakers — designed especially for compatibility with lower-powered valve amps, though Mcleans brought something rather higher in the wattage department, with 90 watts of pure valve power from four matched KT88 in the Rogue Audio Stereo 100 power amplifier, along with the Rogue RP-7 preamp. An excellent choice of tunes — including Diana Krall's take on *Desperado*, and Nick Cave's *Into My Arms* — made this a very hard room to leave.

Audio Active switched out its planned Sony/Theory demonstration for a wall of MartinLogan's surprisingly affordable Motion XT loudspeakers with their Gen2 Obsidian folded-motion (aka Oskar Heil) tweeters: a black pair of Motion XT F200 floorstanders, white F100 floorstanders, along with the B100 standmounts. Powering the set were Anthem stereo amplifiers: the STR Preamplifier with its (excellent, in our experience) ARC room correction, and the STR stereo power amplifier capable of 400W into 8 ohms, 800W into 2 ohms, all playing from a streamer from fellow Canadians Bluesound.

Serhan Swift brought the brand-new mμ3F floorstander, as well as the award-winning mμ2 MkII standmount. The floorstander is a 2.5-way incorporating two differently-tuned cabinets in an arrangement which presents a friendly impedance curve, making them easy for amplifiers to drive accurately. Both Brad Serhan and Morris Swift were on hand to explain the speakers (and argue over music selections); they went for 2.5 over 3-way in this design to avoid a second crossover at critical listening frequencies.

A late bonus in this room came from the inclusion of the latest wonderbox from fellow Australians DEQX, also on hand to explain their years-in-design (and still in beta software, for this period thereby available direct from DEQX at significant discount) new Gen4 LS200, the first DEQX processor with amplification in the same chassis. It performs first speaker correction and only secondly room correction, and can do so not only for passive speakers but for up to 4-way active speakers, and now using cloud computing instead of requiring a PC. So this was another room thrillingly showcasing the skills of Australia's homespun hi-fi industry.

Sennheiser Hearing (the consumer division) brought its award-winning Accentum Plus wireless noise-cancellers and its very latest Momentum Sport wireless earbuds, which integrate both heart rate and body temperature sensors and are compatible

with popular fitness apps including Apple Health, Garmin Connect, Peloton, and Polar.

With the new owners of Sennheiser Consumer being a Swiss medical company, we were also interested to discover the Conversation Clear Plus earbuds, designed as hearing supplements to cut out room noise while focusing on the speaker in front — just the thing many people need to focus through the horrible hard acoustics of so many venues.

Also in attendance was the latest junior member of Sennheiser's Ambeo soundbars, the Ambeo Mini.

Hi End Audio and distributor **Absolute Hi End** brought the brand-new AudioSolutions Figaro M loudspeakers in a very fetching electric blue, being driven by the all-dancing Vitus Audio RI-101Mk2 amplifier/streamer/DAC, along with Silent Angel's dinky switches and streamers, the new $34k SoulNote A3 SE amplifier, and with Vyda Orion cabling throughout. During our stay we particularly enjoyed a powerful dose of Yello, the Swiss electronica pumping alive and real from these stylish speakers and high-end components.

Richter had perhaps the most unexpected demo of the whole show. We were (again) fully impressed with the performance of the latest Wizard S6 Plus floorstanders, just a perfect presentation, tight yet bouncy, with beautiful vocals, and yet at $2899 these were among the least expensive speakers at the show. They ran from a Bluesound streamer with Musical Fidelity amplification.

But then Richter's Brian Rodgers played the same tune (Jane Monheit's version of *Honeysuckle Rose*) through a widel- situated pair of Richter's new Unicorn LCR 'centre' speakers. And then again with them standing vertically. Rear switches on the Unicorn allow adjustment for horizontal or vertical use, as well as tuning for left or right positioning, and with a 1-1.5dB lift over 3-10kHz available to improve dialogue as an optimal centre speaker. So one Unicorn could operate as a centre, two as a stereo pair, or three for LCR in a home cinema set-up. And the sound is a perfect match for Richter's other S6plus speakers, lacking only the lowest substance that a sub would bring. The Unicron is, therefore, Richter's most versatile speaker ever, and made for a demonstration that was as sensational as it was surprising.

Dellichord's Australian creators were on hand in Room 920 to introduce — and explain — both their newly-award-winning isobaric four-driver FR6 standmount speakers and the brand-new FR2035 IsoActive System (outside on the pic above left), which combines an FR35 bookshelf monitor atop the FR20 IsoActive Bass Module, both powered by internal amplifiers which deliver 250W into their 4 ohms. For the passive speakers there were Exposure amps to do the driving, while an Aurender streamer was sourcing the tunes. A cutaway of the FR6 speaker usefully demonstrated the workings of its hidden additional isobaric midrange and rear passive radiator; "otherwise hardly anyone understands what an isobaric design actually is," they told us.

▲ PuraSound's AlsyVox full-range ribbon speakers and astounding Aries Cerat components (those are DACs at front right).

▲ Amber Technology doubled its PSB Speakers demo by treating one pair of Imagine T65 speakers with IsoAcoustics feet.

PuraSound delivered definitely one of our favourite sounds of the show (the coveted Best Sound of Show is chosen by public vote), largely thanks to the bewitching AlsyVox full-range ribbon loudspeakers from Italy. These are actually one of the brand's smaller models despite weighing 85kg each, using two panels 58cm wide and 1.44 metres high, and with 93dB reference sensitivity, making them easy to drive. Doing so here was the $75k Aries Cerat Aperio integrated amplifier with its innovative TriodeFet technology, while on the floor in front were the simply massive Ithaka ladder DACs, each channel using 24 parallel switched resistor ladder converters. Pink Faun's 2.16 Ultra digital server/streamer brought the tunes, with the system completed by cables from Luna and Skogrand. PuraSound's Robert Campbell had predicted to us that this system would be an addictive listen — and he was not wrong.

Amber Technology brought PSB Speakers, running the latest Imagine T65 floorstanders from the 50-year-old Canadian company founded by the great Paul Barton, with source streaming and power from sister Canadian company NAD. Amber cleverly built in a second demonstration, bringing two pairs of Imagine T65 towers. The black pair sat straight on the hotel carpet, while the white pair perched atop a set of IsoAcoustics isolating feet. A switch box (supplied by IsoAcoustics) then allowed seamless comparison between the isolated and unisolated speakers. The difference was clear; this is the second time we've heard this IsoAcoustics demo, and the second time the difference has been greater than we'd expect, so much so that we (again) headed round the back to check for cabling furfies. Finding nothing (other than being unable to assess the switching box itself), we suspect the effect must be real.

Thanks to all who exhibited and attended the Sydney Show — let's do it again next year!

Hisense award-winning TVs for the modern Australian home

Hisense, the leader in consumer electronics and home appliances, continues to raise the benchmark for TV innovation, redefining the future of home entertainment with its TV offering. At the Sound and Image Awards 2024, the brand's U8 Series won "TV of the Year", which stands as a testament to Hisense's commitment to quality, innovation, value and convenience.

The popular, and now award-winning U8 Series is available in sizes ranging from 65-inch to 85-inches and boasts a new, streamlined aesthetic for 2024, further honing and adapting the audio-visual experience to the needs of modern Australian homes. Digging a little deeper, the technologies underpinning the 2024 model have significantly evolved. Now boasting 1,000+ dimming zones and up to 3,000 nits of brightness – formerly 500+ and 1,300 respectively in 2023 – customers will benefit from an impressive uplift in contrast, clarity, and control from the U8 Series.

Hisense's newly announced offering for 2024 reaffirms its commitment to premium value-for-money home entertainment solutions, with its focus on class-leading Mini-LED technology, offering precise control through ample dimming zones to produce unparalleled levels of image detail, clarity, depth and adaptability – a perfect fit for the modern home.

And, with demand for large screen TVs growing year on year, the U7 Series will offer screen sizes from 55-inches, up to an impressive 100-inches, delivering on Hisense's commitment to offer premium home entertainment options at a competitive price point.

The release of Hisense's most innovative range of TVs – its ULED range – sets an industry-leading benchmark for quality, one the brand is proud to uphold.

The full 2024 ULED TV line up inclusive of the brand's flagship UXAU, U8NAU and U7NAU, will continue to level up the viewing experience for customers once more, and will be available from this month at all leading Australian retailers.

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2024 SOUND+IMAGE AWARDS

AWARDS 2024

Welcome to the 2024 Sound+Image Awards, a celebration of the best and best-value consumer audio and AV products available in the Australian market today, and our top recommendations of the year. Products are only eligible to win a Sound+Image Award if we've had them in for a full Australian review in *Sound+Image*, *Australian Hi-Fi*, or our special editions *Audio Esoterica* and *Best Buys Audio & AV*. From all those reviews over the last 12 months, we have 38 award-winners — stand-out products which have particularly thrilled us with their performance, their ability to punch above their weight, their great cleverness at swinging Atmos effects around a home cinema, or the spine-tingling experience of their musical delivery.

We held a glitzy Awards Presentation Evening at the Sydney Central Hotel on April 6, after the Australian Hi-Fi Show had shuttered on Saturday. The healing crystal trophies were handed out… and that's all we can tell you, because *what happens at the Awards stays at the Awards*. Except for the Awards themselves, of course, which are listed right in alphabetical order, indexed to their full-page write-ups that fill this special edition of Sound+Image. Hold on tight to your credit card: here we go...

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Kiat Low

Our final award of the evening was our Lifetime Achievement Award, honouring the work and career of Kiat Low, first at Orpheus Loudspeakers and then Duntech. Kiat was celebrated and inducted on the night with some assistance from his fellow Orphean Brad Serhan, bringing him into the hallowed ranks of Sound+Image Lifetime Achievers.

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JBL Spinner BT

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Let's open our Awards with the joys of vinyl, resurgent as ever, and laughing in the face of the CDs that came to conquer it. Along with still rising vinyl sales we are seeing ever more new turntables from ever more brands.

JBL, for example, was founded in 1946, but didn't get the urge to produce a vinyl-playback machine until 2023, when it announced two. First came the TT350 Classic (see p20), closely followed by this JBL Spinner BT.

The TT350 overleaf is indeed more 'classic' in both looks and abilities, while the Spinner BT winning its award here is bolder and, as its suffix indicates, comes with Bluetooth output (with the aptX HD codec), so you can play your vinyl back through any wireless speaker, and could even position things quite separately and more conveniently in the room.

But there are two other ways, as the Spinner BT can also be a Spinner *sans* BT. There are analogue outputs around the back (no earth cable required), and these outputs can offer the phono level direct from the cartridge, ready to plug into a phono stage or an amplifier's phono input or, if you flick on the 'preamp' switch at the rear, you get a line-level output suitable to feed into any standard amplifier input, or direct into active speakers.

This is a belt-drive turntable, but very easy to set up, the cartridge (the widely-available moving-magnet Audio-Technica AT3600L) arriving aligned and mounted in a removable headshell which screws onto the aluminium tonearm with its adjustable counterweight and anti-skate dial. The platter is a nicely anodised aluminium platter, which in this finish has a lovely burnished gold which you'll see on the edge under the record when playing. The supporting plinth is substantially thick, with large rubberised and adjustable damped feet to reduce vibration, and a hinged cover to keep out both dust and acoustic feedback.

While the price is a reasonable $649.95, this deck does not sound like a budget deck; it has the resolution and speed of higher-level performance. As is almost invariably the case, the best quality is achieved by using the cable connection, rather than the Bluetooth link; the output of its built-in phono stage delivered a clearer sound than when we were Bluetoothing its output, and the very best sound came from using its phono output into an external phono stage (a useful upgrade path for the future). The fundamental level of this turntable is up with the best at the price, which means beyond some at the price; it looks fabulous and purposeful, and it's easy to use as well as simple to set up, thanks to JBL's excellent start-up guide. We reckon the JBL deck should sell buckets. It may have taken the company 77 years to get round to releasing a turntable, but we don't reckon they'll stop any time soon. More info: ***www.jbl.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

The phono output is the best quality, the line-level output the most versatile, and Bluetooth wireless playback the most fun. Solid performance and a cool aesthetic from JBL.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Lenco LBT-225

This is a joint winner: it shares this category with the turntable opposite. That's because the price is very similar, here $699, yet the approach and the presentation are rather different, so our judges decided that both approaches should be recognised.

Lenco's offering looks more traditional. The plinth is no lightweight, being nearly 30mm thick, and that walnut finish (the model number sometimes has WA after it, for walnut) looks a nice dark properly-grained veneer; it fits perfectly around corners, invisibly masked around the sub-platter. (Lenco is based in the Netherlands as part of the Commaxx stable: they manufacture in China, but claim great attention to quality.)

The 13mm green-tinged glass platter which sits on top lends such a touch of class that it's almost a shame to cover it with the provided Lenco felt slipmat. A snazzy carbon-fibre arm is coated in a clear lacquer and has a 8.6-inch effective tonearm length, angled to a 'J' to bring the Audio-Technica AT-VM95E cartridge and its stylus parallel to LP grooves.

As if that wasn't enough for your money, under the platter hangs an electronics section which includes a built-in phono stage, so you can take the output at full line-level into any amplifier, but you still retain the option to switch back to phono level if you have your own superior phono stage.

And there's more — a Bluetooth output, which can pair with headphones or a Bluetooth speaker (or anything else that can receive Bluetooth, such as a smart amplifier).

And what's this USB-B socket on the rear? That's to connect with a computer and record your vinyl digitally. Handy.

At this price — again, just $699 — you might hope to find one or two of those features on a turntable. But the lot? It hardly seems credible.

So the LBT-225 does even more than the JBL opposite, which brings some radical looks and a better-known brand, while here things look more conventional, and though set-up is just a little harder (hanging the tracking weight in particular) the performance is again a pack-leading presentation. The AT-VM95E is a great and easily-upgradable stylus; it tracked beautifully and delivered an incisive and sometimes startlingly real sound from our LPs both old and new; once again we were impressed by a fairly entry-level price delivering no mere entry-level vinyl performance. All in all, we thought the Lenco LBT-225 turntable an absolute bargain for the sound it delivered, while its build (carbon-fibre arm, best-seller cartridge, walnut plinth) and facilities (phono stage, USB, Bluetooth output) offer a great deal extra, and with several upgrade paths for the future.

More info: ***audacityaustralia.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

With four different paths to playback plus impressive build and features at the price, this Lenco will suit those looking for classy looks and high-value vinyl sound.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Few extras on this direct-drive first-ever turntable from JBL, but a clarity of vinyl sound that ticks all the boxes for speed, tone and straightforward wonderful music.

JBL TT350 Classic

We've already seen the JBL Spinner BT perform admirably at its price level of around $650 (see p18). But that youth-orientated Bluetooth-equipped turntable was preceded in its announcement, if not its Australian arrival, by this upmarket TT350 Classic at $1999. That makes this the first-ever turntable released by the Harman/Samsung-owned US marque in all of its 78 years.

It was launched as part of the company's 'Classic' series, specifically with a line-up of JBL separates components around a new SA550 Classic integrated amplifier taking its cues from a 1966 SA600 amplifier designed by Bart Locanthi. The Classic range also now includes three sources: an MP350 high-res music streamer, a CD350 CD player — and this, the TT350 Classic turntable.

But there's no reason this turntable couldn't be taken for use in any compatible system: it's a beauty, sleekly modern yet nicely 'classic', its front edge a nice centimetre-thick slab of aluminium including a large backlit 'exclamation mark' (once JBL's main logo); this lights up red when the deck is in standby and in JBL orange when it is running. In one lovely little design detail, the aluminium either side of the central groove is differently brushed — vertically one side, horizontally the other, thereby differently reflecting light.

Set-up is particularly simple as there's no belt: this turntable is direct drive, with the motor driving an idler wheel which directly turns the sub-platter (masked partially here under a sturdy metal plate). The supplied cartridge is again the excellent and easily upgradeable Audio-Technica AT-VM95E moving-magnet cartridge, which assists with its friendly and accurate sound. With no electronics or Bluetooth to take funds away, all the money here goes into performance; we had the TT350 Classic in our system for nearly a month, and it never put a foot wrong in terms of vinyl replay. Surface noise was low, so low on some new LPs that there was no vinyl giveaway at all, and we sometimes forgot the nature of our source and were surprised when the end groove appeared. The TT350 had a spry ability to keep rhythms tight and punchy as they were dragged from the grooves: perfectly snappy with impressive clarity as the layers of guitar built up, but still a warmth and solidity to the overall picture which made all genres of music flow forth with equal clarity.

It seems likely that the TT350 Classic will sell itself on its brand and its lovely looks. But it will shine through any high-quality system: easy to set up and use, easy to upgrade later, while providing a clarity of vinyl sound that ticks all the boxes for speed, tone and straightforward wonderful music.

More info: ***www.ambertech.com.au***

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WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Denon DP-3000NE

Denon is not a company new to turntables, nor to the direct-drive method of spinning vinyl discs. Direct drive was originally the preserve of radio stations and DJs — hence Denon's first was the DN-302F made for use in Japanese radio stations, released in 1970.

Belt-drive has ruled hi-fi turntables for decades, but new techniques seem to have reduced the importance of cogging and the objections to direct drive; VPI, Rockport, Technics and others will happily now sell you DD turntables upwards of $30k.

There are no convenience extras here: no Bluetooth, no built-in phono stage. The DP-3000NE is priced at $4499, nothing that doesn't include a cartridge: we reviewed it with Denon's own DL-103R cartridge which proved so delightful a partner that we've given it a separate award. So again, all your money here goes into making sound. The one non-standard inclusion is that by pressing both speed buttons simultaneously this deck can run at 78rpm; obviously a 78-compatible cartridge should be installed before you reach for the shellac, but this may be a useful bonus for longtime collectors!

The plinth here comprises a dark ebony natural wood veneer over a solid high-density wood cabinet that sits on four insulator feet, adjustable to allow turntable levelling. An on-board switch-mode power supply avoids the need for a transformer, and provides the voltage (and current) for a 16-pole 12-coil brushless DC servo-motor that is an integral part of the die-cast aluminium platter, in that permanent magnets are fixed to the underside of the platter, while the stator is underneath it, fixed to the turntable.

Speed control, an issue for all direct-drive turntables, is under the command of what Denon rather excitingly calls a 'space vector pulse width modulator' circuit promising a "continuous reliable voltage and frequency output". The S-shaped statically-balanced tonearm has a double counterweight to allow heavier cartridge choices, and anti-skating force is applied magnetically, so there is no physical contact with the tonearm.

It's impossible to divorce the sound of a turntable from the sound of its cartridge, so see opposite; the DL-103R complemented the DP-3000NE wonderfully, despite being only around a tenth the turntable's price. While the turntable is assembled in China, the DL-103R cartridge is made in Japan.

As for stability, we span up the usual old war-horse LPs to check: all blanks here — no audible flutter, no audible wow, so Denon's space-vector circuitry is doing its job properly. No low-frequency turntable noise either, so bearing noise is suitably low. It is built like a battleship — and may just last longer than one. More info: ***denon.com/en-au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

Showing the rise of direct drive at higher levels, Denon's turntable is built like a battleship and delivers rock-solid stability for your chosen cartridge.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

An iterative improvement on a classic cartridge available since 1962, Denon's DL-103R brings extra weight with improved separation and midrange response.

Denon DL-103R

This cartridge came with Denon's direct-drive turntable opposite; indeed we had specifically asked Denon's distributor, Masimo Consumer, to include it, because the '103' is one of our all-time favourite cartridges, in production in one implementation or another for more than half a century now, since 1962 indeed, when it was co-developed by Denon and the Japan Broadcasting Corporation as a wide-bandwidth stereo cartridge that could be 'rolled back' for record cueing.

We own an earlier version, updated now in this latest 'R' version of the DL-103 by using 'six nines' (super-pure) copper in its coil windings.

Being a low-output design, you will need to use a moving-coil step-up device (transformer or phono pre-amp), though the nominal output (0.25mV) is high enough that you'll have a wide choice of suitable candidates.

As for the sound of the DL-103R cartridge, we found that the sound of the 'R' version was slightly improved even over our much-loved earlier version: we thought there was slightly greater weight in the low frequencies, lower distortion across the all-important midrange, and improved channel separation and stereo imaging. But the level of detailing seemed much the same, and the overall 'character' of the sound was also unchanged.

Which is all good!

We should emphasise that our Phono Cartridge Award is not universally-applicable: you can't stick it on anything. It's moving-coil, for a start, so you need a system with a moving-coil turntable input, or a separate phono stage. A good dealer will advise on the best cartridges for a particular turntable you have or may be considering. But for the Denon deck opposite, and in a good many other environments, the Japanese-made DL-103R, at $479, is a winner! More info: ***denon.com/en-au***

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WINNER 2022 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS
Yamaha AVENTAGE RX-A8A
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YAMAHA
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*With online registration

Audio-Technica AT-VM95HIFI Set

The ubiquity of Audio-Technica's cartridges is evidenced by three of our four turntable winners coming with A-T cartridges as the standard inclusion — even though the decks are from other brands against which Audio-Technica competes on turntables. Two of the winning turntables this year — Lenco's and the higher JBL — use the same AT-VM95E cartridge.

This is the green-cased cartridge from Audio-Technica's six-strong VM range. We often mention this in reviews as a great advantage in offering a very simple upgrade path. All AT-VM95 cartridges are compatible with any turntable headshell that accepts half-inch-mount cartridges, needing just two screws to fix, and not even nuts underneath.

The six variations each tweak the stylus profile, and in some cases the shape of the shank and the method by which the stylus is bonded to the shank. Prices vary significantly: the simplest bonded conical stylus in the AT-VM95C comes in its shell for just $59.95, while the top VM model, the AT-VM95SH with its nude-mounted square shank and Shibata-profile stylus, will set you back $329.

Our favourite recommendation is that you don't simply upgrade from one to the other, but that you keep a selection on hand, since they are easily swapped out for use on different occasions with different priorities.

Audio-Technica itself must have exactly the same thoughts, because this year it released a AT-VM95HIFI Set. We reckon this is an award-worthy idea — a bundle of three different Audio-Technica VM95 styluses, each mounted in a cartridge and headshell; the set also comes with a polycarbonate case to protect the cartridges from UV light, and a tack-based stylus cleaner using polyurethane gel (see below right). The package price of $896 represents a saving of around $100 on the headshelled-cartridges even without the extras you get included.

Which three cartridges? Well not the green VM95E, as that's probably the one most people will already have. Once that is getting tired you might, for example, use the orange AT-VM95EN's elliptical nude stylus as an upgrade for day-to-day vinyl playback, but easily unscrew the headshell and pop on the superior Microlinear stylus-equipped red AT-VM95ML for dedicated listening sessions, while still keeping the brown AT-VM95SH with its Shibata stylus for special occasions — such as copying a new LP for a digital copy.

So the stylus of the day can become a subjective journey, influenced by individual preference, the complexity of musical genres enjoyed, and the desired level of fidelity. Each cartridge imparts a unique sonic fingerprint — literally shaping your vinyl sound.

More info: **audio-technica.com/en-au**

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

VM95 cartridges are so easy to swap in and out that you can keep this selection of upgrades on hand to tailor your vinyl listening to the needs of the day.

Classics
REIMAGINED
JBL | Authentics
JBL.com.au

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

OAD UltraFidelity UP1

The founder, owner and lead designer of the all-Australian Melbourne-based brand OAD UltraFidelity, Jon De Sensi, has been busy of late, bringing to fruition models that have been in the pipeline for many years, including the Vajra power amplifier and Padma preamplifier.

The design brief that underpinned the development of this OAD UltraFidelity UP1 phono stage intended it to be affordable (it sells for $2799) and to have sufficient flexibility to accommodate any moving-coil cartridge on the planet. The success of this latter goal can be judged over the more than three years the UP1 has been available, during which De Sensi says that "every customer has found one resistive loading appropriate for their MC cartridge".

That versatility is delivered by the variety of options made possible by the various DIP switches arrayed across its back panel (see right), where there are user adjustments for load impedance, load capacitance and gain.

As far as load impedance is concerned, if you're using a moving-magnet cartridge, you have only one option: 47 kilo-ohms. That's the only option you'll need, too, since all MM cartridges require this load. Some, however, require different load capacitances, so the UP1 offers you two options: 100pF and 220pF, augmenting the standard 100pF.

There are seven options for moving coils: 22, 30, 50, 100, 200, 430 and 1000 ohms (though you could also use the 47 kiloohm setting that's more typically used for MM). Inherent gain is selected between 40dB (moving magnet and high-output moving coil) and 60dB (low-output moving-coils), and you can add an additional 20dB of gain in 5dB steps — for both left and right channels.

Meanwhile the UP1's 240V step-down transformer is completely separate from the phono preamplifier itself, which means that high-voltage AC is kept separate from the sensitive phono circuitry, via a two-metre-long umbilical cord. This, in turn, has kept the chassis of the preamplifier usefully small — 21cm wide and 95mm tall — although when you pick it up, its size belies its weight, because thanks to its very thick (5mm and in some places more!) CNC-machined anodised alloy chassis, it weighs in at a hefty 2.3kg.

Versatility is one thing: sound quality another, and the OAM proved itself here through both its unbalanced and balanced outputs: the UP1 revealed the true nature of instruments even when playing en masse, while the fact that the left and right channels of the OAD UP1 are totally separate was evident from outstanding channel separation.

Made in Australia, yet challenging all comers on value? That's award-winning performance. More info***: oadultrafidelity.com***

JUDGES' COMMENT

Simplicity inside, excellent versatility outside: this is an Australian-made product that challenges all comers on the value of its sound quality.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Perreaux's VP4 shows how smarts and sound can merge seamlessly even in a primarily analogue product like a phono stage. Top tech from across the Tasman!

Perreaux VP4

Another Australasian product wins our higher phono stage award: this time from New Zealand, where Perreaux has been innovating in high-end audio for close to half a century. It was originally founded by Peter Perreaux in Napier on the North Island in 1974, but was moved to Dunedin after 2018 by Dutchman Edwin Nieman, to be closer to his own business, Kamahi Electronics, which designs firmware, software and apps for avionics, industrial electronic systems and scientific instruments.

And this connection is no side story, because it is clever software which stands the VP4 phono stage apart. It can be controlled via an app. It has the ability to operate without mains power, thereby isolating its tiny signals from contamination by noise introduced by your home's 240V mains power supply, the wiring for which is effectively just a huge antenna for all kinds of radio-frequency interference, as well as for contamination caused by other appliances in your home: computers, televisions, and refrigerators.

But look at the back panel below, and compare it with the UP1 opposite. What don't you see? All those endless little DIP switches, that's what. So does the VP4 lack the versatility to adapt to different phono stages?

Not at all. Its circuitry can be fine-tuned to deliver the precise load and gain to suit any moving-coil or moving-magnet phono cartridge on the planet. But here Perreaux has built in software/firmware that means all this load and gain fine-tuning is automated. If you own a VP4 you simply tell it what cartridge you are using — and it will automatically create the correct load and optimise the input sensitivity to deliver the best match. Even if you do need to do the maths, the app does the calculations for you (and is regularly updated, along with its database of cartridges).

But once set up, you disconnect the app (to remove the Bluetooth connection), stop it charging (to isolate it from the mains), and just relax. The sound of the Perreaux VP4 is gorgeous, irrespective of moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridge, though if you're a true *vinylista*, moving-coil is the only way to go. The VP4 delivered that incredibly realistic sonic purity and sweet-sounding midrange that is the hallmark of vinyl done right. The imaging was accurate but without the steeliness of digital, and the sound-staging was super-rich with a 'fullness' and a 'completeness' to it that continues to elude digital.

If you can do without the battery operation and all the app's cleverness, consider also the value of the DIP-switched VP3 at $2999. But the $7490 VP4 shows how smarts and sound can merge seamlessly even in an analogue product like a phono stage. Top tech from across the Tasman! More info: ***perreaux.com***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Marantz CD 50n

The Compact Disc may be done as a physical format for the future, but the silver discs offer better sound than basic streaming, while every charity shop in town is packed with secondhand CDs, the cheapest possible way to build a music collection.

So there's good reason to keep a CD player as part of your hi-fi system. And our winning CD player brings a great many more abilities to recommend it. In addition to the central CD slot, Marantz's CD 50n is an all-round smartypants, the 'n' standing for 'networking', because there's streaming music onboard here, thanks to the wireless streaming and multiroom HEOS platform, This covers paid and free services including Spotify Connect, Tidal, Deezer, Amazon Prime Music, TuneIn internet radio and more. In addition HEOS allows AirPlay 2 and DLNA local streaming from NAS drives and connected devices.

It's also a digital preamplifier, with digital inputs, variable outputs, and the ability to share music with other HEOS devices around the home for multi-room playback. The inputs include optical, coaxial digital, a USB-A slot for drives of files and a USB-B socket for playback from a computer (up to DSD11.2 and PCM 384kHz), Bluetooth in (as well as Bluetooth out back to a pair of wireless headphones) and, very usefully, an HDMI input.

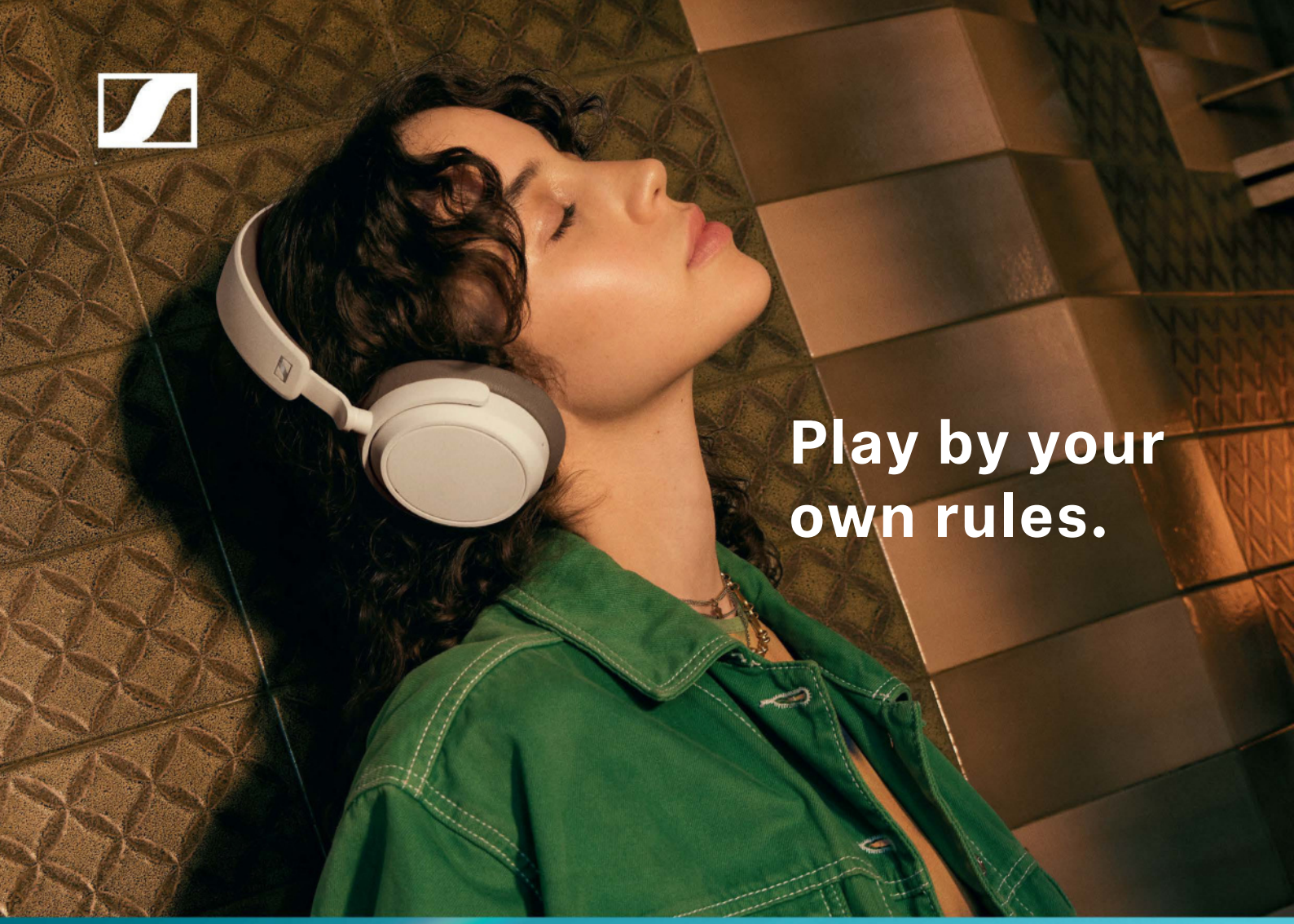
That last might be a big bonus for many users, making the CD 50n a full TV and music source, handling everything that won't plug into a more traditional analogue amplifier (we tested the CD 50n with the all-analogue Marantz Model 50, an obvious pairing, with each unit selling at $3200).

Not forgetting the audio source that gets the naming rights: the CD slot. While not spinning SA-CDs, all other CD formats (CD-R, CD-RW) are fair game, and the CD 50n uses a true 780nm CD laser, not one of the lower frequency lasers used in DVD or Blu-ray players which are less ideal for CD playback. All digital sources pass through the internal combination of an ESS ES9038 Hyperstream DAC and the company's own custom-designed musical digital filters.

Sonically the CD 50n delivered impeccable clarity whether streaming from Tidal through the HEOS app (screenshot shown left) or spinning up the silver discs within its CD drawer; indeed when comparing stream with disc, the CD versions often gained extra layers of detail and nuance, greater impact and intensity, a reminder that streams can be CD quality on paper, yet still inferior to the performance from physical media. So while streaming may be the popular future of music, there are a million silver reasons to stick with a CD collection, and the Marantz CD 50n delivers such disc-based music — and more — beautifully. More info: ***www.marantz.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

While streaming may be the future, there are a million silver reasons to stick with a CD collection, and the Marantz CD 50n delivers disc-based music (and much more) beautifully.



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WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

SENNHEISER

Sonus faber Duettos

Where merely active speakers (see p67) require source components, streaming speakers can be a complete system alone. That's the goal of the Duettos — they build on Sonus faber's single-unit Omnia (an award-winner last year), bringing the same streaming and ease of use to a proper two-speaker system, which is, after all, where the Italian company has its expertise.

So here the two beautifully-veneered speakers boast what Sonus faber calls a 'lute-shaped' cross-section for their leather-covered top panels, while the fascias combine a 28mm silk-dome tweeter backed by a ferrite magnet system with a copper cap on the pole, above 133mm long-excursion paper-pulp cones, with neodymium magnet systems, copper caps and aluminium rings, housed within Sonus Faber's new 'Organic' basket.

These are active speakers, of course, so there are amplifiers internally, four in total, one for each driver, all mounted within the crossover section. Each tweeter has a 100W (no envelopes stated) Class-AB amplifier, and each mid-woofer a 250W Class-D amplifier. To dissipate heat there's a large ribbed heatsink that surrounds the port and dominates the rears of the speakers, so much so on the Master that you don't initially see where the connections could all be.

The answer is that they're pretty much underneath, including optical digital in, an analogue RCA pair which can play from a line-level input or a turntable equipped with moving-magnet turntable. Finally there's a very handy HDMI input. So you could add digital and analogue sources, plus TV playback.

Or you could just stream, and have an extraordinary simple yet high-quality hi-fi system. Connect then to your network via via Ethernet or Wi-Fi to use Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Chromecast, AirPlay 2 or Roon, or use Bluetooth for a convenient but lower-quality connection.

Any which way, the Duettos sounded fantastic. Vocals were clear, crisp and emotive even above complex backings, the Duettos having plenty of depth and power to unravel and present all the strands in music, and able to play loud without cracking up. We loved their delivery of vinyl — rich and smooth yet packed with power and punch. There's a subwoofer output, but in a small or medium room they don't need one — though as with the Omnia, do check out 'hidden' EQ settings (notably Loudness Maximiser, which is left on by default).

This is a real stereo hi-fi system, everything you might need for the price of $6995, and nailing the streaming speaker brief in a highly consumer-friendly way.
More info: ***synergyaudio.com***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

The Duetto speakers sound fantastic, and they nail the active streaming speaker brief in a highly consumer-friendly way, while being able to add TV and audio inputs.

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JUDGES' COMMENT

The 'Plus' version of Sennheiser's Accentum Wireless headphones are dull lookers but better to hear, being solid performers on the fundamentals of sound quality.

Sennheiser Accentum Plus Wireless

Two pairs of wireless headphones get our Awards this year, but at wildly different price-points. First these Sennheiser Accentum Plus Wireless models, RRP $399.95, so placing them between the company earlier Accentum Wireless ($299.95) and the higher Momentum 4 wireless noise-cancellers.

Our UK colleagues at What Hi-Fi? were unusually unimpressed by the first Accentum, notably criticising the complete lack of styling on this ultra-plain black headphones. We absolutely agree. Sonova, the new owner of 'Sennheiser Hearing' consumer products, seems to have dipped the latest designs into a bath which melts away all vestiges of style and ornamentation. The black version is simply featureless: a design black hole. It can be assumed they were following Sony's lead, but they have tilted into full-on Hotblack Desiato.

But of course, we don't judge headphones primarily by their external appearance. Our review criteria begin with sound, closely followed by sound, then ease of use, sound, and finally construction and appearance. So we listened. And the Accentum Plus is a great-sounding midrange headphone. Music sounded true to tone, well-separated and delivered with good punch and pace when required, effective sound-staging, and a well-filled bass register underpinning it all. Both male and female podcast voices were realistically delivered, no pinches or bloats.

All this was judged listening in a relatively quiet environment, via Bluetooth, having engaged the automatically-variable noise-cancelling option via Sennheiser's Smart Control app. The app also allows EQ adjustment, but as noted, we didn't need it — until we took the Accentum Pluses out on the road. The noise-cancellation worked best when blocking a regular drone, such as aircraft noise, but it failed to fully silence a more variable bus commute, the remaining background bleeding into the bass frequencies of music playback, so that we needed additional bass via the EQ controls. But Sennheiser's implementation is strange: instead of turning bass up, it turns everything else down, so you lose level.

The 'Plus' version of the Accentum gains touch-sensitive tap and swipe controls using the flat outer surface of the right earcup; it all works reliably if you stick to the basics, and is much better than buttons. The Bluetooth codec list advances from aptX HD in the plain Accentum to aptX adaptive here, which may or may not sound better depending on your equipment and your environment.

But mainly these headphones impressed us with their business-like good fundamental sound, a reliable connection, plus the big bonus of 50-hour battery life (when playing medium level with ANC).

One final note: it is worth checking the price on those higher Sennheiser Momentum 4s, which can dip within $100 of the $399.95 Accentum Plus, and are definitely worth that differential.

More info: ***sennheiser-hearing.com/en-AU***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

The T+As are gems, alone in a territory of wireless performance quality that no other pair we've heard can occupy, and also a fine listen via cable or USB-C.

T+A Solitaire T

It is not unusual to see high-end home headphones reach a price like the $2499 of the Solitaire T, but this is new territory for wireless noise-cancellers that are intended to travel. The reason is that German hi-fi company T+A started from its high-end 'electromagnetostatic' designs, switching to the compact, closed-back form here and incorporating wirelessness, ANC functionality, and a new 42mm dynamic transducer made of wood-fibre-plastic which has very high power handling and is said to produce sound pressure levels over 120dB.

The Solitaire T can be used passively, unbalanced or balanced, where their quality is maximised by partnering with a good-quality DAC/headphone amp. But it's their digital and wireless abilities which truly astound. There are two main modes. In 'Standard', a Qualcomm QCC5127 chip takes the digital audio either over Bluetooth (AAC and aptX HD supported) or via the USB-C connector and performs the conversion, while a CXD noise-cancelling chip by Sony handles real-time equalisation and digital-to-analogue conversion. The analogue signal is then passed to T+A's Class-AB power amplifiers feeding the drivers. And this Standard mode delivers an astounding 70-hour battery life, trumping most wireless over-ears' endurance twice over.

But T+A's 'HQ' (High Quality) mode bypasses the ANC chip and the Qualcomm's conversion, instead using a Sabre ESS DAC and a subsequent high-current power amplifier. This mode halves the Solitaire T's battery life — a still competitive 35 hours —but also transforms the sound, achieving nothing less than bridging the gap between wired and wireless performance as we know it. They impart no character or colour to your music; they tell it as it is, a listen that we can't describe as anything else but pure. It's as tangible a soundstage as we've heard through wireless headphones, too, with each element of the track's jangling instrumentation placed precisely on it, and with space around it assisting coherency.

Physically they look superficially fairly ordinary, but more luxurious in the close-up: the buttonry beautifully implemented alongside a rather small touch surface (there's a neat touch-for-transparency function), the headphone-folding impeccably engineering to minimise storage size in their provided case.

So we salute not only the lofty goals of the Solitaire T, but the success with which they have been achieved, delivering both fine passive sound and, more miraculously, wireless performance which rises to a new level. More info: ***interdyn.com.au***

Stax SRM-D10 II

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

It's a very particular solution to a particular need: a compact semi-portable driver for Stax electrostatic earspeakers. Yet it is delivered with irresistible craftsmanship and quality.

This may seem a very particular product for a particular purpose, and that is true — a headphone amplifier which powers specifically electrostatic headphones, most likely Stax's own 'earspeakers'.

But it is several things beyond that. You can feed it, as any headphone amplifier, with an analogue cable from a preamplifier, amplifier, or direct source. But it also has a USB-C connection for a computer (or mobile phone via an OTD kit), doing DAC duties to 384kHz PCM and DSD256, DoP and native.

The final contribution comes from an internal battery, making the D10 a portable product. There are, of course, a great many portable headphone amps. But this one powers electrostatic earspeakers, which require 580V bias voltage. Until a few years ago this needed a large mains-powered brick of an earspeaker driver, nearly always offering two earspeaker sockets side by side (though we oft wonder how many earspeaker owners really listen in couples). Alongside those twin-socketed slabs, the single-socketed SRM-D10 II is decidedly compact, yet substantial when you pick it up, its aluminium-alloy curves and milled knob really quite thrillingly tactile.

There is further quality immediately evident in the neat array of gold-plated cables tucked away in the final box-within-a-box of this packaging delight, its carefully-folded packets and boxes revealing multiple USB cables for different power and data tasks.

Its battery charged from the mains in less than an hour; we listened first by the analogue input to vinyl, the SRM-D10 II ($1650) driving Stax's $1370 SR-L500 MkII earspeaker (it refers to them in the singular), which we know from previous listens. The question, then, was whether the battery here could still allow their full performance?

Undoubtedly the answer was yes, and later when we ran a minijack from our phone into the analogue input there was a strange wild freedom in walking around the home wearing electrostatics, enjoying that incredible open world of finely-etched soundstages and lightning-fast impulses while on the move.

A key word there is 'open': all Stax's earspeakers spill sound out as well as in, so that portability is tempered by proximity to anyone objecting to such audible outpourings. Besides, earspeakers are not really built to travel. So consider the portability here more as allowing local movement, as well as removing the potential taints of mains interference.

Shifting to USB playback, music was startling in its clarity, digital all the way to the driver as it was, all manner of modern tunes sounding fresh from the studio through the L500s' significant electrostatic glory. Sessions spent bathing in this Stax sound were entirely irresistible. More info: ***audiomarketing.com.au***

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TCL 55C845

It's a difficult time of year to present televisions with awards: TV models are updated every year, and the 2024 models are just beginning to land as we decide which of last year's models were the stand-outs. Then again, this is exactly the time of year when you might snag an extra bargain on these outgoing 2023 models.

With that in mind, we are making two television awards, both joint winners of 'TV of the Year'. We can't separate them by technology, since both use Mini LED technology. We can't separate them by price, because end-of-year changes have seen their prices change dramatically and even cross over.

This 55-inch TCL C845 Google TV, for example, is officially listed at $1999, but is currently available $700 or more below that tag, an absolute bargain for the level of technology onboard. China's TCL was first to bring Mini LED to market, the panel technology which combines tiny backlights in zones behind an LCD panel and quantum dots (QD). It's a combination which challenges OLED performance, and indeed beats it in several key areas, notably brightness.

For this model TCL doubled the number of backlight zones by splitting each former zone vertically into two, for better local dimming. The LEDs themselves are different,as well, amplifying available brightness by acting almost like three LEDs in one.

Mini LED through LCD with a quantum dot enhancement film delivers highly accurate colour performance: here 100% of the DCI-P3 colour space, or to put it another way, every colour that a cinema camera is capable of capturing. Another lift in performance is the ability to have a 240Hz refresh rate for the LCD panel when in Full HD; for UHD it can run to 144Hz, which will delight gamers.

The picture was immediately impressive out of the box: the kind of visual punch that sells high-level TVs. In 'Smart HDR' mode the luminance was mad, yet never crushing or flaring, instead supporting impressively three-dimensional contrast and clarity between edges of objects; no apparent enhancement, just pure performance. It is, really, bordering on the hyper-realistic.

Google TV brings all the streaming services as well as Chromecast streaming and voice control; it's a tried-and-trusted interface.

We tested the 55-inch, smallest of the series, but the 65-inch won a 2023/24 EISA Award, and the C845s are now available in screen sizes up to 98 inches (official price $9999), a sign of even bigger things to come as some real monster screens of 100-inches-plus start arriving in 2024. In the meantime, you'll not find a better-performing TV bargain than TCL's C845 series: get them while you can. More info: *www.tcl.com/au*

JUDGES' COMMENT

A super-bright Mini-LED picture with everything you need to optimise it, Google TV interface, and a good price! It's hard to believe the quality you get for the money.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Seeing out its time in Mini LED Pro glory, the 65-inch U8K shows Hisense moving from its value niche into performance that challenges all comers.

Hisense 65U8KAU

Our second joint TV of the Year is another Mini LED TV from another Chinese company, and also another example of how these brands are now being recognised as much for high technology and premium performance as for their initial market stances of being 'bargain' brands. The Hisense U8K model (just being replaced in the market by the incoming U9K) may qualify as a bargain, but it does so by being a brilliant TV at a sharp price, not by being 'cheap'.

While Hisense is making this move to be recognised as much for high technology as for its bragain market stance hitherto, the company's tech sometimes needs a little untangling. It has, for example, mutiple different levels of Mini LED performance — from simple 'Mini LED' in the U6K and U7K models to the 'Mini LED Pro' on this U8K, and above it a "ULED X Mini-LED X". The differentiation is primarily down to LED size and the number of zones into which they're grouped. The U8K reviewed here has, we believe, its 10,000 LEDs grouped into more than 500 zones, more than six times the number of zones the previous year.

Whatever the tech, this is a great-looking TV at the price, which is listed at $2499 for the 65-inch we tested, with street discounts at the time of press varying from $200 to more than $600. There is also a 75-inch version available.

Hisense is focusing increasingly on its VIDAA platform in Australia and the UK, also an excellent interface, logically laid out, and very snappy, with access to the majority of streaming apps and terrestrial catch-up services, though not 7plus, and also a wealth of extras, so along with the four HDMI inputs you're getting a true entertainment centre as much as a mere TV.

More to the point, all the little things worked, and worked well. You can tweak modes for all inputs first and then tweak individual inputs afterwards, so that we certainly enjoyed some super-bright impressive pictures out of the box, but settled things into more realistic and tempered performance that was highly accurate and handled motion issues well.

The U8KAU's built-in sound system even does better than most TVs, assisted by a rear bass driver and genuine forward-facing drivers at the front.

We already know that Hisense has tweaked things up further for its 2024 models, so you can compare the full new prices of those with the reductions available on this outgoing 2023 model. If the savings allow you to enjoy a higher level of TV performance than you would otherwise stretch to, then you've got yourself an award-winning bargain.

More info: ***www.hisense.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

BenQ has upgraded its circular projection concept with higher quality visuals but the same extraordinary simplicity of set-up and battery operation.

BenQ GV31

You can, as we'll see, spend tens of thousands on a full projection solution. But you can enjoy some casual bigscreen entertainment for far less. Taiwan's BenQ has been rolling out ranges of such semi-portable projectors for some years, and we've been particularly impressed with the unusual circular concept employed originally in the GV30 model, and now in the updated GV31.

The most obvious element is the circular design, and the way this allows the GV31, like its predecessor, to slot into a little magnetic base tray and then be revolved to shine out at whatever angle you'd like. This may be up or down a bit, to get the image just where you want it on your screen or wall, or it might be a full 90 degrees to point up at the ceiling, so you can enjoy your home entertainment when lying horizontal, most likely in bed, but potentially teenagers enjoying a slumber party with Taylor Swift videos playing on the ceiling.

The GV31 is further assisted in this versatility by having a rechargeable battery inside, so it doesn't need mains power all the time. When fully charged it can give something like three hours of battery juice, so you could play your movie onto a screen in the garden, or on the walls of a family tent out in the bush. And if the little magnetic tray doesn't let you revolve the projector to the right position, there's a little screw mount underneath which will fix it onto a tripod.

If you have Wi-Fi access, you can make use of the Android TV dongle which comes with the GV31. This is BenQ's own in-house media stick, accessing endless Android apps for streaming video and music, as well as casting from Android and iOS devices, or from a computer. To stream anything this way you'll obviously need a network connection, but even out in that tent in the bush you might enjoy such streaming by tethering the projector's Wi-Fi connection to a hotspot from your phone, assuming you at least have a video-worthy mobile signal.

Besides streaming you can plug sources into the GV31 via HDMI, and since all this streaming of pictures isn't much use without a sound system, the GV31 has this built in: necessarily small, but effective.

One of the GV31's greatest assets is how it automatically adjusts both the screen size and the focus: the GV31's sensors and small lens deliver auto focus and auto vertical keystone. Even though the resolution here is only 1920 × 1080 to start with, and the available brightness really delivers its best after sunset, the GV31's mix of assets nevertheless make it a great projector for *ad hoc* entertainment whether outdoors, in a holiday home, or for those slumber parties with Tay Tay — and with a friendly price-point of $999.

Info: ***www.benq.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

A beautiful 4K long-throw projector which delivers equally alluring images, Android streaming and a built-in harman/kardon sound system.

XGIMI Horizon Ultra

Here's another unusual form factor for a projector: this time a full 4K long-throw model designed to operate from the back of the room. We reckon it's a real looker; it's ironic that Leica came back to projection this year (see our final projection award) because when we first saw the Horizon Ultra, its creamy leathery aesthetic (they call it 'misty gold') had reminded us very much of an old family Leitz slide projector. When powered on, the top section of the frontage slides down to reveal the lens, there's a quick autocheck which extends to focus, position check for the optical zoom, even a wall colour adjustment, and then you're onto the home page of the XGIMI's smart interface.

Because this is another projector which aims to provide a complete entertainment service: it's a smart projector with an Android TV dongle for streaming endless entertainment sources, and it has speakers built in too.

It is genuinely bright: it can blast away a lot of ambient light if in use during day time, while colours richen so that it looks fabulous at night. The headline at launch was that this was the first 4K projector with Dolby Vision, but HDR remains debately irrelevant at projection brightness levels (especially if you don't use a proper screen). The real achievement of XGIMI here is more the quantity and quality of light from what is a DLP projector using an 0.47-inch digital micromirror device. XGIMI credits its success in this to a 'breakthrough' 5-channel hybrid light path using 17 glass types for a light source which combines laser light with panchromatic (full-colour) LED lamp beads. The result is a claimed 2300 ISO lumens, but in practice the Horizon Ultra outshone several projectors we've had in the same position which claimed 3000+ lumens.

It's a good image too. Streams from the built-in smart interface have some limitations (Android TV dongles still can't automatically follow the frame rate of source material), and we got best results by plugging in an external media box (an Apple TV 4K *can* follow frame rates), while we're never quite comfortable with sound coming from a projector behind the viewer. In that regard one of the HDMI inputs supports HDMI eARC, so a larger sound system could be incorporated.

But the image processing was reliably good; there's even a gaming-friendly latency of 18ms if you turn off some of the projector's automated processing, The remote control is as beautiful as the cabinet, long and silver and tactile, although it has inexplicably invisible volume buttons, in black on black.

From the eco-friendly PU leather to the bright colourful images, we thought XGIMI's Horizon Pro to be a cut above in both performance and design style. Its RRP is $3499, and it's sometimes lower. More info: ***xgimi.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

BenQ W4000i

JUDGES' COMMENT

A theatre-level projector with first-class image quality and a fast gaming mode which knocked 10 seconds off our *Gran Turismo* lap times.

Another excellent projector from Taiwan's BenQ tops our main projector awards — the W4000i is more traditional in looks and several levels above its quirkier portable GV31. This is a true home cinema model which delivered excellent colours, blacks and DLP-level 4K resolution.

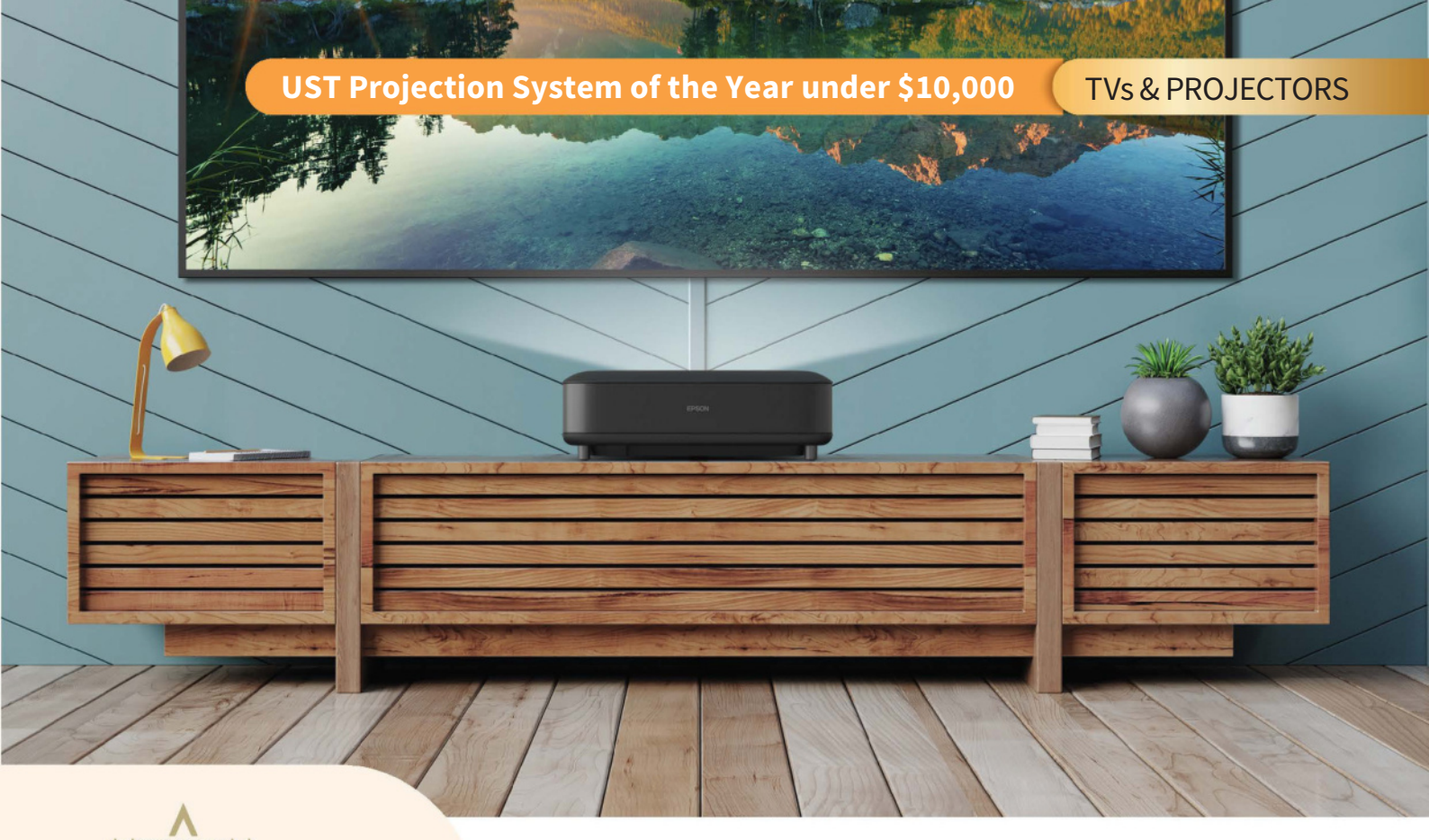
As a proper theatre projector it measures significantly larger than BenQ's business and lower-cost home entertainment projectors, a full 42cm across, and weighing a solid 6.6kg. It's a '4K' model, using solid-state LED lamps which are warrantied to 20,000 hours of use, and that 4K is built up in DLP style from four flashes of a 1920 × 1080-pixel 0.65-inch Digital Micromirror Device. BenQ rates the brightness at 3200 ANSI lumens, and the contrast ratio at up to 2 million to 1.

The unit supports HDR in HDR10, HLG and HDR10+ flavours, while for both Rec.709 and DCI-P3 colour standards the projector offers 100% support, not some mere subset of the colour range. BenQ is fanatical about colour at this level of projector, every unit individually calibrated for accuracy at the factory and provided with a calibration report.

There is both vertical lens shift (up to 60%) and horizontal (up to 15%), but when no lens shift is applied, the image is centred on the lens axis rather than cast upwards or downwards, so while the lens shift allows some adjustment, you need the projector somewhere in line with the screen unless you want to resort to keystone adjustment.

Despite being a higher-level projector BenQ still supplies its Android-TV dongle, which sits neatly at the back of the projectorc and doesn't steal one of the two main HDMI inputs (one of which offers ARC audio). This dongle now supports Netflix (for years most projection apps and sticks have been unable to support Netflix), and when we ran a couple of episodes of the most recent season of *Dark Mirror*, the W4000i kind of startled us with how exceptionally good it looked. Black levels aren't OLED or Mini LED in their darkness, of course, but they are dark enough to go beyond the threshold in which black on-screen items look to the human eye legitimately black. Even in dark scenes which are deprived of a contrast range which helps those blacks look black, the dark levels are convincing enough for unimpeded enjoyment.

The higher bit-rates of Blu-rays and UHD Blu-ray delivered even sharper pictures, while brightness was also excellent; even 'Eco' mode will support screens of 100 inches or fewer inches. And from PlayStation 5 we measured latency at 18.2 milliseconds here also, an impressive low result. So you might spend thousands more to achieve even better performance, but we reckon they'll be diminishing returns. At $4999, the W4000i seems unbeatable. More info: ***www.benq.com.au***



WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Firing up from below makes for convenience in set-up, but presents challenges in projection. Epson delivers an impressive complete solution here.

Epson EH-LS650B

Here we change categories to a different type of projector, Ultra Short Throw (UST) meaning that instead of being at the back of the room or on a table halfway back, they sit almost directly under the screen onto which the image is to be projected, shining their picture upwards.

In their efforts to replace a TV, the UST breed often comes with a smart interface (e.g. Android TV) with streaming apps, along with built-in speakers, appropriate in this projector type since it sits at the front of the room.

More than that, some manufacturers either bundle or strongly recommend a fixed screen, so that users do not simply shine the picture on a wall. UST projection from below is c hallenging, and bare walls really won't do.

So this Epson EH-LS650B sells for $3999 alone, or $5799 if bought together with a 120-inch screen that uses ambient-light-rejecting screen material, exactly what you need for a UST projector to perform to its best. With the EH-LS650B producing a high 3600 lumens of white light output, that helps overcome the usual 'daytime use' barrier to the idea of having a projector replace your television; we coud happily watch movies in daylight, though losing detail in the blacks.

Epson also has its regular advantage here from its own unique projection technology — 3LCD. Many projectors have a single panel and use a colour wheel which rotates to provide sufficient colour variation, but thereby also reduces the brightness of individual colours. With its three dedicated LCD panels, Epson's colours have exactly the same brightness as its white delivery: 3600 lumens.

We used our own screen, though Epson has adjustments for wall colours as well as squaring up the picture, but for this latter function it was easy (and better) to get the image straight by moving the projector and raising its feet. For a 100-inch image the front edge of the projector was 65cm from the wall.

There's no broadcast TV here, but the socketry and settings are comprehensive, with built-in smarts again via Android TV (though without a Netflix app). The sound system is excellent, more full than most projectors' sound; indeed we had to tame it back by turning off the default bass boost. The sound is designed by Yamaha, according to Epson, rather than the mere 'calibration' usual from a third-party company. There's also optical audio out and HDMI ARC for connecting a bigger system. It's nicely compact too. Its one drawback for us was very significant fan noise on our review unit throughout operation, which Epson assures us is a sample issue.

Otherwise Epson's excellent sound and top-notch eco-friendly projection makes the LS650B a cracking complete product for the price. More info: ***www.epson.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND + IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Leica turns its glass-making skills from highly-engineered cameras to ultra-short-throw home projection, and delivers one of the year's most desirable products.

Leica Cine 1 - 100

In our world it's an Ultra Short Throw Projection System; for Germany's Leica it is a 'Cinema TV'. As with the Epson, it combines an ultra-short-throw projector with smart streaming and a built-in sound system — but here there are also TV tuners for free-to-air, even more fully fulfilling the intended role as a complete TV replacement. You can plug in external sources, but the Cine 1 could provide everything you need in one neat and quite gorgeous package.

And it is a real stunner; Leica's external design is both classic and luscious. But it's the lenses that are very much the crucial thing here. Lens quality is crucial in any projection system, of course, but even more so in an ultra-short-throw, with the technical challenge of delivering an even spread of light and accurate imaging when throwing a rectangular image from almost directly below the screen.

Leica Summicron lenses are renowned in the camera world, known for exceptional sharpness, even when used wide open, and for their ability to produce images with high contrast and rich, natural colours. Here Leica's glass is at the other end of the chain, rendering previously-captured images back into the real world with the minimum of distortion.

Leica Image Optimization (LIO) processing is also employed, with 'special algorithms' promising "particularly natural colour rendition, richly detailed colour gradation and outstanding contrast ratio". And being prime lenses, you position the projector to perfectly match the screen; hence Leica offers 100-inch and 120-inch versions of the projector as well as the screen, and a wide range of screen style options to fit impressively into your home. Again here, the screen should be considered an essential bundle; you'd be crazy to pay for the Leica glass without using a proper screen.

For the rest of the unit, the Leica Cine 1 sees the German company in a partnership with Hisense; the connection is clear when the Cine 1 opens up to a VIDAA smart interface. It's a technology partnership, as it was explained to us; Leica has clearly built upon the Laser TVs offered in recent years by Hisense. Yet the Leica is far more expensive: it's $13,999 for the Cine 1 ($14,999 if you're going 120-inch, plus a minimum of $3690 for the ambient-light-rejecting screen.

But then we have never reviewed a UST projector so able to banish ambient light effectively. This is assisted three ways: by the ambient-light-rejecting screen, the inherent brightness (approximately 3000 lumens), and the quality of the Leica glass. As any Leica camera fan knows, Leica glass is expensive, but the results speak for themselves. Definition and clarity were exceptional, as laser sharp as the light source suggests.

It is, after all, a Leica.

More info: ***leica-store.com.au/cine1***

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JUDGES' COMMENT

Externally it looks the same as the previous model, but internal upgrades and updated abilities bring Sony's new midrange receiver back to the top of its class.

Sony STR-AN1000

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss, we said when we reviewed Sony's latest seven-channel AV receiver. We were referring to its appearance, because it looks exactly the same as the previous STR-DN1080, a highly regarded receiver even after five years in the market; indeed the front hasn't changed much since the latest model's great-grandpa was released back in 2013.

But while Sony's industrial design team may not have turned up, the engineering team has been hard at work bringing technical standards up to date with HDMI 2.1, with 4K compatibility throughout, and two inputs that handle 8K as well. Internal upgrades over the previous model include new power supplies, an optimised digital section, and DACs getting a new analogue output filter circuit. Claimed result: better sound, lower noise floor.

There are still seven channels of power on board, so this receiver is able to service a straight seven-channel surround system, or a 5.1 system plus two height channels (which is how we primarily assessed it), or with an additional zone of audio. You bring your own speakers, of course, but the STR-AN1000 can also connect wirelessly to optional Sony rear speakers and wireless subwoofers.

While HDMI standards are raised, the socketry is unchanged, with six HDMI inputs, though two now compatible up to 8K/60 or 4K/120. There's Dolby Atmos and DTS:X processing onboard to get multichannel movies, TV soundtracks and music delivered to your chosen channel count.

Additional inputs for audio components are relatively sparse: just one coaxial digital and one optical input. There's a USB-A socket (on the front) for sticks, but no USB-B available for plugging a computer in.

The only physical addition since 2017 is a minijack socket marked 'S-Center' for use with specific Sony XR TVs, allowing you to use the TV audio as your centre channel — convenient, but not necessarily the best thing for a homogenous front sound field. There's music streaming several ways — AirPlay 2, Chromecast, and Bluetooth with LDAC. There's an FM tuner inside, but no DAB+.

It's a brilliant performer for the price of $1699, whether pounding out space-movie soundtracks or extending its subtleties into something more atmospheric; its accuracy of tone was confirmed by music listening both in stereo and in Atmos, such are today's joys of multichannel music. As with almost all equipment which has a Pure Direct button, we highly recommend using this mode whenever you can.

So it looks the same as the old one — but is fully updated and sounds even better. An easy choice for our judges. More info: ***sony.com.au***

Marantz Cinema 40

Marantz here and Denon opposite are sister companies, travelling together under first D+M, then Sound United, and now Masimo Consumer. When one releases a range of AV receivers, so does the other, and in many respects, such as their back panels, the products can look remarkably similar.

But they are differently tuned, generally using different amplification technologies, and they certainly look different from the front. Marantz (a Masimo 'luxury' brand) has a new livery, with a false fascia forward of a spiral-etched front panel, a style which has proven successful across its AV and hi-fi separates.

There are currently five AV receivers in Marantz's new range: lowest is a $2000 slimline Cinema 70s, highest for now (not counting the AV 10 processor) is the $7900 Cinema 30. Power and channel counts rise through the range, so that this $5000 Cinema 40 arrives with nine channels of power, a number which not only allows a larger surround system than five- or seven-channel receivers, but also more versatility for how you use any leftover channels — the Cinema 40 can actually handle three separate extra zones, one with video, the other two audio only.

Marantz has thrown everything into the Cinema 40: not only the latest surround formats and 8K compatibility across all its HDMI inputs, but things that hard-core users might need, notably legacy connections, with one component video and two composite video inputs, all converted to HDMI.

What hard-core users need most of all, of course, is power: here the specs are quoted various ways up to 235W a channel under AV-style criteria, but the more hi-fi figure is 125W per channel into 8 ohms across the full audible frequency band and driving two channels at once with only 0.05% distortion allowed. And 125 proper Class-AB hi-fi watts from Marantz proved to be plenty of power.

Round the back, of course, profusion: seven HDMI inputs all specified to 8K, and plenty of assignable audio inputs. Plus with HEOS onboard, you're sorted for streaming entertainment under app control.

How does it sound? Awesome. The swooping X-wings in the last hour of *The Rise Of Skywalker* (UHD Blu-ray) provide a steering challenge for any Atmos decoder. The Marantz shrugged it off, and pulled us into the action rather than the soundtrack: good work. Rey's final communion with Jedi past is lovely subtle sound design, dropping voices at varying distances with varying effects.

The power should be more than adequate even for a good-sized room, and the pre-outs allow expansion if you should need more. All bases covered: this receiver is a very safe pair of hands. More info: ***marantz.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Marantz's second top integrated AV receiver brings nine channels of high-quality power — with finesse and a great deal of versatility in delivering them.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

From 15 channels of amplification to the convenience of its HEOS streaming, Denon's AVC-A1H brings everything you could possibly want in a modern multichannel audio-video component — and manages to fit it all in a single box.

Denon AVC-A1H

One difference between sister companies Denon and Marantz comes at the top end of AV receiverdom. Marantz splits its top offering into two — a processor and a multichannel power amp. Denon, on the other hand, delivers this AVC-A1H: a monumental integrated AV receiver that has 15 (that's fifteen!) channels of power onboard, with each of those channels rated with a power output of 150 watts.

With four independent subwoofer outputs, that means you could use it to drive a Dolby Atmos home theatre system with a nine-channel floor layout plus six overhead speakers and four subwoofers, no need for extras (except bringing the speakers). There's also enormous versatility for lesser systems plus additional zones. And the manual is 256 pages long — lengthier than many novels! Do you need to read it? Probably not. Recognising the device's operational complexity, Denon has built in a 'Setup Assistant' (as does Marantz) that guides you through making all the necessary connections and performing the various calibrations avaiable. The only thing you're required to do yourself is connect your screen to the Denon so that the 'Assistant' can provide the on-screen advice.

We built up slowly, starting with two-channel stereo, with no processing at all, to get a baseline for the amplifier's level of performance. We were very pleased with what we heard when auditioning both the analogue and the digital inputs. The sound was clean and very powerful. We were also impressed by the audibly perfect channel separation and stereo imaging — quite a trick considering how many channels are on offer here.

Through 5.1 we went, where we enjoyed some classic 5.1 music mixes sounding wide and dynamic, and as we added more speakers the Denon not only met our expectations but exceeded them by a wide margin. In the scene in *Blade Runner 2049* where K and Joi fly from Los Angeles toward the orphanage, the sound of the waves crashing against the flood barrier was spookily real, as were the effects when the rain hits the windshield. When the bullets streaked across the room we jumped... and jumped again when the lightning struck. So there was not only power in use here, but also power in reserve, and whipcrack speed in bringing it to bear.

Among the profusion of inputs (there's barely a square inch of unused rear panel) the only circuit we can think that the AVC-A1H omits is an AM/FM radio, so that some will call this an AV amplifier, not a receiver. But that's churlish given that there's internet radio from the HEOS platform (which puts the 'H' after its name). The AVC-A1H may retail at $11,999, but given what it does, it's amazing it exists at all. More info: ***denon.com/en-au***

Yamaha SR-B40A

Regular readers may wonder why the SR-B40A soundbar and subwoofer have made our Awards: we were really quite rude about it when we did our original review. But that's because Yamaha makes some ridiculous claims for it on the website, with an animation of a sphere of sound sources all over the room (including underneath you) and talk of "*a brand-new immersive experience*"... "*fills every corner of your room with expressive sound*"... "*fully immerses you in a sonic universe*".

That's nonsense: this is a soundbar with just two tweeters and four circular midrange cones specified at 46mm diameter, all of them firing directly forward from the bar, joined by the 16.5cm driver in the subwoofer. It plays in 2.1 — stereo plus a subwoofer. So of course it can't do any of the immersion it promises. It can decode Dolby Atmos, but Dolby Atmos rendered to 2.1 is not remotely immersive.

So we've put all that aside. Because the SR-B40A, when sold on its actual merits, is an excellent-value soundbar and subwoofer package. Just $645 gets you the 91cm-long bar and 42cm-high subwoofer, and set-up is very simple, since there is only one HDMI socket, connecting to your TV's ARC-compatible HDMI socket, thereby playing all TV sound to the soundbar. There is an optical input as a fallback for those without ARC or with compatibility issues, but no analogue fallback input, nor any direct input HDMI socket, so Yamaha clearly sees this as a simple-to-use soundbar solution to plug and plug with your TV. All other sources connect to your TV.

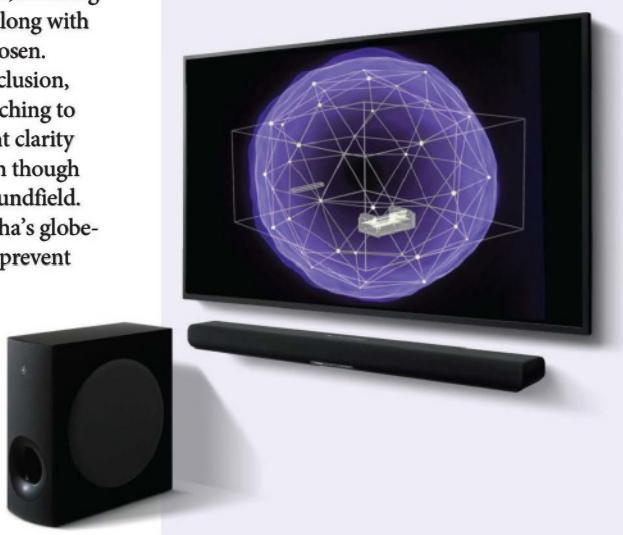
It works great. This system integrated well, perhaps because the bar is of a reasonable size and can meet the sub at a relatively low crossover, avoiding any directional pull in the bass. We were listening to Atmos from Disney+ within minutes. (We knew the bar was getting Atmos because if you press 'info' on the remote, one of the front lights goes green if Atmos is getting through; useful!) And it sounded involving: rich, full, remarkably dynamic, and easily tweaked to any particular preference for material using the remote control. There's also an app available, called Sound Bar Remote, allowing useful input and mode selection, along with visual feedback on what you've chosen.

Dolby Atmos is still a useful inclusion, even on a driver-limited bar:. Switching to an Atmos soundtrack here brought clarity beyond stereo or 5.1 material, even though there was no sense of the wider soundfield.

So while we may scoff at Yamaha's globe-of-sound illustration, that doesn't prevent the B40A being a great-sounding soundbar system within its less immersive limits. It does so well, indeed, it gets our Award as an excellent-value 2.1 system. But not as an immersive one! More info: ***au.yamaha.com***

JUDGES' COMMENT

We had to fight through a furfie to realise the quality of performance from this simple but effective 2.1-channel soundbar and subwoofer combination.



WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

Genuine 4.1.2-channel performance from soundbar, subwoofer and a pair of satellite rears which can be used as wireless speakers in their own right.

Yamaha True X system

Ranting about Yamaha's pretence at immersion in the previous soundbar award is particularly ironic when here the company's 'True X' system genuinely delivers just that immersion, and does so without any trickery at all, instead simply putting real drivers in all the right places.

So the soundbar (SR-X50A) and wireless subwoofer alone deliver 2.1.2 channels, meaning stereo left and right from the front of the bar, two additional driver units on the top of the soundbar which bring Dolby Atmos height performance to the performance, plus the '.1' of the wireless subwoofer.

If you then add two little speakers, called variously 'True X Speaker 1A' or WS-X1A, these mono speakers each connect wirelessly to the bar, extending it to the surround realm. You get two of these 1A speakers in the $1599 True X package, so the full system delivers 4.1.2, as well as bringing networking and music streaming under a fairly simple app.

But there's more — these little 1A speakers are designed to live a second life when detached from the soundbar. They can operate in 'Solo' mode as standalone Bluetooth speakers, paired in stereo or used separately in mono anywhere in the home and indeed beyond, thanks to IP67 dust and water-resistance rating, and because they can play on their own battery power, as well as plugged into the mains or via an optional charging cradle.

The bar can also be used for music, with its app offering streaming services including Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect and Amazon Music; Apple users can stream any music to the system via AirPlay 2. Bluetooth (though SBC and AAC codecs only) is also onboard.

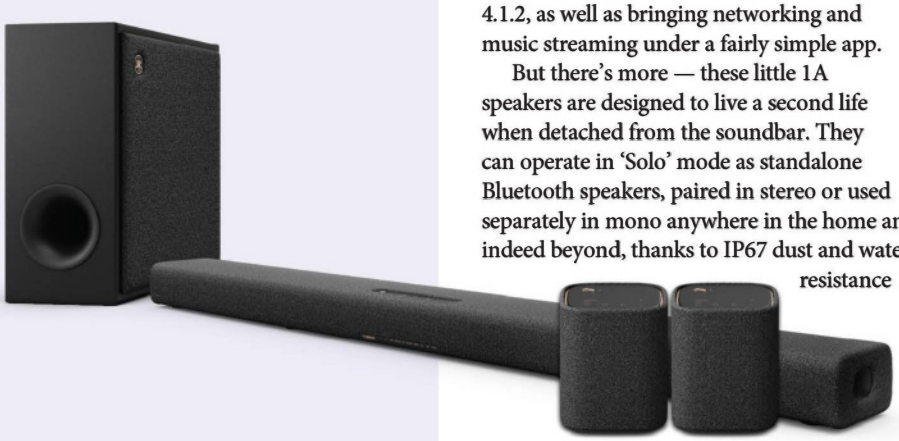
A built-in microphone in the soundbar also enables direct voice control with the Amazon Alexa voice assistant app.

Best of all, it sounds great. In *Loki* S2 on Disney+ the Atmos soundtrack is almost as convoluted as the plot, and the addition of the Yamaha surrounds expanded the bar's soundfield not only for the whizzbang action moments, of which there are a great many, but also for simple acoustic situations like the reverb of the TVA chamber in which Loki and Mobius have their first long chat in S2E1.

There is no substitute for real physical rear speakers, and those upgrading from a bar with mere virtual pretence at surround will find the true immersion here bewitching on delicate material, thrilling for busier action soundtracks. Meanwhile the solo 1A speakers provide just enough bass support for a wide range of pleasant listening when used away from the system, as say a bedroom speaker.

Great concept, well executed — and it's also great to see Yamaha now reaching back up to a higher level of soundbar performance.

More info: ***au.yamaha.com***



Yamaha R-N1000A

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

A well-chosen set of digital skills with solid amplification and sound in a stereo amp suitable for both music and, with its HDMI input, for full TV and movie entertainment too.

This award make three in a row for Yamaha, but here we are out of the AV sound categories and into the more rarefied air of hi-fi stereo amplifiers. But it's no surprise to find the Japanese company here as well: Yamaha is celebrating 70 years of hi-fi products this year (it is around 137 years old all up), having purportedly been the first to use the contraction of Hi-Fi in the name of a product: the 1954 'Yamaha Hi-Fi Player'.

Things have moved on rather from then, although there is a remarkable style continuity across the decades. But the R-N1000A stereo amplifier benefits from Yamaha's most recent hi-fi renaissance, which started with a luxurious 5000 Series and has now reached the more affordable 1000 Series: the R-N1000 has an RRP of $2299.

It is impressively equipped. The inputs include not only the usual analogue and digital inputs (including phono for a turntable), but also HDMI ARC, making this a complete home entertainment solution for TV and movie sound, as well as music. It's great to see also a USB-B connection for computer, something often missing from digital sections on stereo amps like this, and able to play to 32-bit 352.8kHz/384kHz PCM or DSD512, thanks to the abilities of the ESS Sabre ES9080Q DAC which does the conversion.

In addition to the physical inputs there's also fully-fledged MusicCast onboard here, Yamaha's well-established streaming and multiroom platform, bringing all the main streaming services both paid and free, along with internet radio, under handy app control, and able to share music around the home.

There's an FM tuner for analogue radio and a DAB+ tuner for digital radio.

Within the R-N1000A, much design work flows down from those higher series: the one-point grounding system of Yamaha's 'low impedance concept', custom-made power transformer and block capacitors, the same combination of symmetry and signal directness as in the top amplifiers, even the resin-framed 'Art Base' and double-bottom chassis survives into the 1000 Series.

That gives the best possible basis for the amplification to do its work, rated here at 2 × 100W into 8 ohms. We streamed and we span discs both silver and black through the Yamaha, and all sources were treated to an open and dynamic presentation with power enough to drive even our least-friendly speakers. Of course you could spend more to get more (hence Yamaha's higher ranges, and our higher awards), but the R-N1000A combines well-chosen digital skills with solid amplification and sound performance in an great all-rounder of a stereo amplifier.

More info: ***au.yamaha.com***

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greg borrowman, Australian Hi-Fi, on the mμ2 Mk II

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Roksan Attessa

Roksan is a UK brand which started life making turntables in 1985, but this Attessa Streaming Amplifier is an example of the electronics into which the company later diversified during an evolution which included acquisition in November 2016 by British loudspeaker manufacturer Monitor Audio. Roksan is wise to emphasise the 'streaming' in the name, as this version of the Attessa comes with BluOS onboard. That's the music management system behind Bluesound; it allows you to access and stream lossless music up to 24-bit/192kHz via your home network, and integrates with most streaming services — Qobuz, Deezer, and Amazon HD as well as free services and internet radio. It also supports Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect, plus streaming via Apple AirPlay 2.

That's all on top of Roksan's own control app for the Attessa, and of course all its more conventional amplifier functions — although as you can see, it's quite a different look from conventional hi-fi, with its single rotary control at the centre of the front panel, and black 'wings' extending to either side full of lights and indicators.

There are three analogue inputs (two line-level and one phono-level), plus two optical and two coaxial digital inputs, and two USB-A slots, the first for use with a Wi-Fi dongle, while the other can be used to connect a USB stick or drive with music files, which the BluOS app will index. There's also Bluetooth.

So it's not particularly laden with inputs, though with a better selection than on some other BluOS amps. Notably here there's no HDMI ARC socket to make this amp easily TV-compatible, nor USB-B for a computer (remembering, though, that BluOS can play over a network from shared computer files).

For its amplification the Attessa uses a conventional Class-AB output stage, with two pairs of output transistors per channel, delivering a quoted 2 × 80W into 8 ohms, or 2 × 130W into 4 ohms (both channels driven, THD+N <0.1%). Listening sessions proved this a powerful, quiet amplifier with an extremely neutral sound and an obviously extended frequency response, particularly in the low frequencies. It was also capable of extracting the best performance from the various different loudspeakers we tried, from large four-driver three-way floorstanders all the way to two-driver two-way bookshelves. We were entranced by the sound, and we were impressed too by the price of $3149, given the combination of amplifier quality and the great facilities of BluOS — and compare the lovely design of this amplifier next to some rather more boxy BluOS amps around this price. Put that all together and the Roksan Attessa Streaming Amplifier is a potent sweet spot of real value for money here in Australia.

More info: ***interdyn.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

The inclusion of BluOS streaming makes this a thoroughly modern amplifier, while the basics of power and control are impressive at this price.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

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Advance Paris A12 Classic

In Australia, Advance Paris is a new brand, but it has a 25-year history in Europe (as Advance Acoustics, the company was making loudspeakers as far back in 1995). We've so far tested three of the company's latest offerings, and two of them proved remarkable enough to secure our awards. You'll find a pre-powr combination further on, but let's begin with this fairly straightforward stereo hi-fi amplifier, the A12 Classic, pitched at an upper-midrange price of $4499.

There are some key Advance Paris characteristics: the front fascia in full black, dominated by two large and lovely blue VU meters, calibrated to show power output into eight ohms, and also dB.

Between the two VU meters, behind the glass, sit a couple of smallish vacuum tubes. These are employed in the pre-amplifier section in order to provide, says Advance Paris, "a musical sounding amplifier without aggressiveness." We'd lean to the view that 'valve sound' has more to do with power amplifiers — the differences in distortion characteristics compared to solid-state output stages, rather than their use in what is here a hybrid amplifier with valves in the preamp, and then a solid-state power stage delivering 190W per channel into eight ohms, 280W into four ohms. And it's big in consequence: 20cm high and weighing an impressive near-18kg.

While the power amps are solid-state, they have an unusual option to switch to a 'high bias' mode, which heavily biases their push-pull transistors away from the 'zero' point, where crossover distortion occurs. It means that except when you're playing very loud, the majority of the music will be in pure Class-A mode, with no crossover distortion. (The cost of this mode is higher energy consumption and greater heat production.)

The other delight common across Advance Paris products is their well-stocked rear panels, as loaded with intriguing switches as they are with inputs and outputs: five traditional stereo RCA inputs, a phono input switchable, two sets of balanced XLR inputs, three optical inputs, three coaxial inputs, an AES/EBU XLR, USB-A, USB-B for computer, and two HDMI sockets! All in all, there are very few better-equipped amplifiers around.

And we loved the sound of the A12. Playing files and Tidal digitally from PC, everything sounded great — well, except for the music which didn't, given the kind of transparency on offer. But stuff we know to be of high quality, and a surprising amount of regular music, simply sounded great. Especially at higher volume levels. And really, regardless of the bias setting. Plus with vinyl, real thrills. This is clearly a brand from which we want to hear more.

More info: *synergyaudio.com*

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

We love the look, the connections are exhaustive, and the A12 Classic's valves glow softly as it makes its beautiful music. It's a big welcome to Australia for Advance Paris.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800.2

It's hard to envisage the sheer bulk of this integrated amplifier until you see it, and we'd certainly advise against lifting it: it weighs a monumental 41kg. That's a function of the two large toroidal power transformers that supply the discrete left and right power amplifier section, of the solidity of construction, including extensive heatsinking down the sides, and of the power on offer: "Driving ability startles," wrote EISA's experts when giving it their award, and they're right — 2 × 330W into 8 ohms and up to 1000W into 2 ohms, with massive current ability: it will handle any loudspeaker.

On the front are perhaps the most gorgeous meters we've seen on any amplifier, and not old-fashioned (or slow) mechanical meters but rather solid-state, so you can switch the Nu-Vista 800.2's meters through multiple display formats, colours and modes.

All this without highlighting the amp's secret weapon: the Nu-Vista vacuum tubes that were introduced by RCA in 1959, physically smaller, more robust and higher performance than anything else available at the time, and with no glass on show; these are valves inside little metal tins. Musical Fidelity has made quite the hobby of tracking down the last remaining stocks of these valves so that the company's Nu-Vista hi-fi ranges can continue in production.

We're glad it has done so, as this latest Nu-Vista amp seemed to be entirely unbreakable. At one point we even challenged it by connecting a second pair of speakers in parallel, driving both pairs simultaneously just to see if we could trick the protection circuitry into tripping — but the Nu-Vista 800.2 just continued powering on, sounding exactly as if it was driving a single speaker pair.

The perfection of the Nu-Vista 800.2's deep bass delivery comes with incredible delivery of transients, while further up the frequency range this amp not only delivered every single nuance perfectly, but also added no noise at all to the music. The silences were gloriously silent. The way the Musical Fidelity separates musical elements was aural magic; it almost thrives on complexity, delivering such richness like a complex tapestry.

So while this integrated amplifier may sell at $22,000, it delivers gloriously smooth and musical sound quality, partly courtesy of trouble-free valves that are going to last forever (well, close to forever!), more power on tap than you are ever going to need, and the ability to drive any loudspeakers you care to connect; plus a sleek and impressive (albeit very heavy and sizeable!) chassis that just oozes class and is completed by a to-die-for front-panel display that will be the envy of your friends. The Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800.2 is a simply superb all-rounder!

More info: ***audiomarketing.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

Gloriously smooth and musical sound along with the power to drive any speaker on the planet: the 800.2 is a high-level amplifier which proved itself a true all-rounder.

Halcro Eclipse Stereo

The Halcro Eclipse Stereo is not only Australian-designed and built, not only the most recognisable high-end amplifier in the world (along with being one of the most beautiful), but it is also the quietest, and has the lowest distortion of all.

If you think that is part and parcel of what makes it one of the best-sounding amplifiers in the world, we're not about to disagree. You may, however, be surprised to learn that the Eclipse Stereo is not one of the most expensive hi-fi amplifiers in the world. It is not even close — dozens of its competitors have price tags in excess of $150,000, whereas the Halcro Eclipse is $69,990. And this being the latest stereo version, you'll only need one of them.

The story behind the design is also one of the most interesting and unusual in audio, the brand being resurrected after a chance meeting in a South Australian record store, when it was discovered that the original Halcro circuit diagrams, PCBs and tooling were all gathering dust in a storage facility not far down the road.

Which is why the 'look' of the Eclipse Stereo is directly copied from the design of the original Halcro dm38, with the electronics separated into four heavily-shielded modules — an audio power module, an audio drive module, an inductor module and a power supply module. In order to remove the heat passively without using fans, the heatsinks for the output devices are extraordinarily large, and have also been completely redesigned for the new Halcros, to reduce microphony.

The company holds its circuitry secrets close, but it inherits DNA from the original Halcro dm38, as well as from the Eclipse Mono, though many aspects have been improved either through improvements of technology or research by the new company.

Input and output connections are made on the module at the top of the amplifier, at the rear: unbalanced (via gold-plated RCA) and balanced (via gold-plated XLR) inputs, plus a 'low gain' unbalanced input. The speaker cable terminals are absolutely huge!

So far so impressive, but of course it's that unrivalled performance and noise floor which astound when you hear the Eclipse Stereo in action: kick drums in exact syncopation with high-hat strikes, everything in its own sonic envelope, no unwanted overhang, and absolutely no modulation of the lowest-level background sounds on a track.

It's an object lesson in the importance of state-of-the-art amplification in an audio reproduction chain, yet also presented as an audio work of art in itself.

Which is why when we're asked by overseas hi-fi folk what brands come out of Australia, the one we mention first of all is... Halcro.

More info: ***halcro.com***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

An object lesson in the importance of state-of-the-art amplification in an audio chain, yet also an audio work of art in itself: this is Australian hi-fi at its best.

Distinctive Design, Elegant Execution, Beautiful Sound.

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Advance Paris X-P700 / X-A220 Evo

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Back to France for our final amplifier award, with Advance Paris also taking our our gong for preamplifier and power amp pair. There have been some monster winners in these categories in the past, rising into the tens of thousands of dollars. One of the things we like about this pair is that they're relatively affordable: $2299 for the X-P700 preamplifier, $2900 for the X-A220 Evo mono power amp, of which you'll need two, so the full set comes in just under $8100.

The pre-amplifier is lower in height — and here lacks the valves that glow on the company's integrateds. Its size also limits the inputs, though they are still generous, with seven analogue RCA inputs and a switchable phono input, two opticals and one coaxial, one USB-A and USB-B, one XLR input and XLR preouts to the power amps. There's one subwoofer output, and a choice between two optional Bluetooth modules.

The VU meters move one to each power amp, and if you love large power output level meters, you're going to simply adore the one inset into the beautiful glossy methacrylate black front panel of the X-A220 Evo power amplifier, because it's by far and away the largest one we've ever seen. (And of course, you'll get two.) As the name might suggest, it is rated with a power output of 220W into 8 ohms, or 350W into four ohms — analogue Class-AB, albeit not entirely conventional because again there's sliding bias available, with High Bias mode ensuring the amp operates effectively in Class A through the first watts of use (which will be most listening with most material). The trade-off is heat; so ensure plenty of space and air flow around these components when in use!

The combination made wonderful music for our listening sessions. Listening to Gracie Abrams' album 'Good Riddance', we were impressed by the way the Advance Paris pre/power trio delivered the emotional content of the confessional nature of the lyrics, while simultaneously delivering the purity of the finger-picked acoustic guitar sound, the depth of the bass and the overall atmospherics. *Full Machine* may not be the album's best track, but sonically it's a masterpiece that the Advance Paris partnership was able to reproduce in our listening room to perfection. Channel separation and stereo imaging were impeccable, and the combo proved equally at home with either analogue or digital sources.

So Advance Paris gains two awards in its first year Down Under; it seems an impressive new brand for Australia, delivering high performance and delightful aesthetics, at prices that appeal. More info: ***synergyaudio.com***

JUDGES' COMMENT

High performance and delightful aesthetics at attractive prices — this pre-power combination gets the three-box formula absolutely right.

Dellichord

★★WINNER★★ 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Standmount Speakers
Of The Year $2500-$5000
Dellichord FR6

FROM OUR IMAGINATION DIRECT TO YOU

Dellichord loudspeakers offer music lovers a genuinely enthralling experience. Made in Australia yet rivalling international brands in engineering, build and sound quality.

1000's of hours of research and development has gone into each of the Dellichord models to meet the exacting standards of our design team.

We build the sound we love, so you can love them too.

dellichord.com.au

Scan to find out more

PMC prodigy1

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

JUDGES' COMMENT

PMC successfully brings its technology and signature sound to a far more affordable level with this pair of plain-looking but stunning-sounding standmounts.

When British brand PMC revealed a new entry-level range with a starting price nearly half that of the previous most affordable PMC model (the Twenty5 21i), the question was whether the company could compete at such a level against relatively mass-market brands like KEF and Bowers & Wilkins.

Once we had a pair of the $2399 Prodigy 1 standmounts on test, however, it became clear that far from pandering to the mass market, PMC has been happy to leave the new models looking rather plain, in order to focus on taking its studio-grade sound mainstream. According to PMC, the Prodigys are even measured and listened to alongside reference models, and are similarly signed off by their assembler before they're boxed up and ready for shipping.

The two-way standmounts' 27mm soft-dome tweeter and 130cm mid/bass driver have both been taken from models further up the company's line, the tweeter developed from the PMC result6 studio monitors, and the natural-fibre dished-cone mid/bass unit being the same as featured in the company's successfu custom install series, and coupled with PMC's signature ATL (Advanced Transmission Line) bass-loading method, as used in all PMC speakers, guiding back energy through damped material and out of that distinctive 'Laminair' front port. The ATL also works to keep air pressure inside the cabinet consistent, improving control of the driver.

If you like grilles, they'll cost you $199 extra. If, like us, you don't use grilles, this is great, and makes you wonder how much you've wasted on other speaker grilles you've never used. All the focus and cost here has gone into the engineering, as you realise when you hear just how spectacular the Prodigy 1 sounds: precise, articulate, insightful and even-handed, all PMC attributes which have been maintained into these lower models. Play Anohni And The Johnsons' *It's My Fault* and the Prodigy's midrange talents come to the fore as emotion pours from the vocal.

And the bass — wow, the bass! For speakers of their stature and price, they dig deep enough to not only carry the lowest string note in the walking bassline beneath but do so while retaining its definition. Low frequencies have pace and punch too: *Grammar* by Floating Points had this dance-floor banger punching out of the woofer with real force of will and stop/start precision.

While 'analytical', these speakers are never informative at the expense of entertainment, just as they are systematic in their sound reproduction but never soulless, rather another pair of PMCs easy to wholeheartedly recommend for a hugely enjoyable performance. More info: ***www.interdyn.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Dellichord FR6

JUDGES' COMMENT

The best thing about the FR6 speakers is not their isobaric complexity, it's the simple pleasure of listening to their music.

The Dellichord FR6 is difficult to fully describe without the use of the cutaway graphic reproduced below. From the front it looks like a simple two-driver two-way standmount. But there are four drivers — in addition to the front baffle's 25mm soft-dome tweeter and 16.5cm natural-fibre mid-woofer, there is a large passive radiator at the rear, and then the final driver is inside the cabinet, positioned in what is known as an isobaric arrangement (iso 'equal, baric 'pressure'). This arrangement puts multiple (here two) identical drivers one behind the other, so that the rear one has no direct coupling to the air in the room from either of its surfaces. When both cones move in the same direction, the air between them — and the air pressure between the two — remains constant (equal), whereas the air pressure behind the back of the inner driver becomes lower when the cone moves forward, and greater when moving forwards.

The result is that the front cone — the one delivering sound into the listening room — essentially moves as if it were in free space, and without low-frequency cancellation effects.

This can gift an isobaric design very low distortion, while Dellichord's addition of a passive radiator on the back of the FR6 enables them to extend and tune the bass response.

So why aren't more loudspeakers made this way? Because it's expensive to do so, requiring more components and far more complex construction. The Dellichords are also built not overseas, but locally, in Queensland. Yet when they've done all this extra work, nobody can even see it. No wonder they did a cutaway.

But you can hear it. From our first listening session it was clear that the Dellichord FR6 was punching well above its weight in the bass department, in the extension and the levels of the low frequencies, and in their neutrality. Listening to SZA's *Kill Bill*, the gorgeously soft and deep bass was reproduced with an almost loving tenderness by the Dellichords, such that it was instantly audible that there's something different about it — which turns out to be that it's played using a six-string electric guitar tuned down an octave. It's a strange and lovely sound, beautifully reproduced by that low-distortion mid-bass combo. Then blasting out a Sheherazade, the extreme treble notes were perfectly pitched and rang perfectly true, no hint of exaggeration or forwardness.

Efficiency of 85dBSPL is the one penalty for isobaric dual drivers, so the $4995 FR6 standmounts are at their best when driven with quality power from, say, price-comparable amps. Then you can revel in their extended and realistic-sounding bass, coming from speakers less than 40cm high, accompanied by great midrange, lovely treble, and an all-encompassing stereo image. The best thing about the FR6 speakers is not their deceptive complexity, it's the simple pleasure of listening to their music. More info: ***dellichord.com.au***

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Serhan Swift mμ2 Mk II

Not so much building on the original mμ2 as changing nearly all of it, the mμ2 Mk II remains a two-driver, two-way standmount, using drivers from European specialists but very much an Australian speaker design, their backplates signed twice: "*Each pair of mμ2 Mk ll takes 3 days from start to finish under the watchful eyes of Chief Loudspeaker Designer Brad Serhan and Engineering Director Morris Swift. Brad performs final testing and then he and Morris proudly sign each unit.*"

Serhan is a notorious tweaker, and here all elements — cabinet, woofer, tweeter, crossover — have been re-examined and significantly improve on the original, with lessons learned from a Special Edition and from ongoing research, particularly into cabinet vibration, leading to constrained layer damping material being custom-manufactured for the mμ2 by Les Davis Audio, while a new multi-layer cabinet uses differing composition and thicknesses, along with new bracing to further reduce cabinet vibration and coloration.

The mid/bass driver is easily recognisable as a Scan-Speak Revelator from the distinctive appearance of the 'sliced cone', the grooves keeping its break-up modes under tight control. Their tweeters are offset, so there are two ways to arrange your speakers, perhaps with tweeters outside for smaller rooms, or inside if more widely separated in a larger room. The 'ring radiator' design of these tweeters and the unique shape of their central phase plug is another Scan-Speak giveaway, although Serhan Swift is a little coy about specifying the exact crossover frequency between the two drivers, explaining that the acoustic crossover will vary with use.

Such technicalities melt away when you settle down for a listening session with the mμ2 Mk II, their delivery so involving that our review notes regularly tailed off as we were just listening to the music! When a loudspeaker has this effect on you, particularly in the high-pressure environment of testing and review writing, you know it's special. Indeed the original review in our sister magazine *Australian Hi-Fi* was a total gush: "*an exceptional-sounding pair of speakers — one that is exceptionally detailed, exceptionally flat across the midrange and highs, and has exceptionally low distortion and exceptionally precise imaging and soundstaging.*" And far be it from us to pop their reviewing high. The beauty of Serhan Swift's mμ2 Mk II speakers is that music just seems to flow from them organically, effortlessly. Again, bring a high-quality amplifier to drive these 84dBSPL speakers to their best abilities, because if you do so, there is no end to the pleasure they will bring with their impeccable musical delivery. More info: ***serhanswift.com***

JUDGES' COMMENT

Music just seems to flow effortlessly from the mμ2 Mk ll, the original tweaked in significant ways to make this Australian speaker still more involving.

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AUDIO SYSTEMS

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"The T2 W is an audacious attempt to marry analogue vinyl playback with digital convenience, and one that Pro-Ject manages to pull off with zest."

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EISA AWARD Best Product 2023-2024
VINYL SYSTEM
Pro-Ject T2 W

* Requires compatible streamer.
Learn more at projectaudio.com.au

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Richter Wizard Series 6Plus

Here's the third Australian loudspeaker in a row in our Awards, something we're thrilled to see — and to hear. These are the largest of the three, and yet at $2899 the pair is also the most affordable, by some margin. This will be partly because Richter's Australian team gets them built in China, but also because the latest Wizard builds on a proud history of bang-for-your-buck award-winners and legends — close to 40 years in one incarnation or another. According to Richter at least, more Wizards have been sold in Australia than any other loudspeaker designed in this country.

The latest Wizard remains a 2.5-way design (the two mid/bass drivers both producing low frequencies, but only the upper one delivering midrange). The drivers' magnetic system in this new model has been redesigned to make the response considerably more linear, which supposedly delivers "smoother cleaner performance where it matters", while the pulp mix for the cones mushes together paper, hemp (non-smokable), kapok, wool and engineered chemical fibre — a combo Richter says delivers just the right blend of lightness and stiffness.

The 25mm soft-dome tweeter, surrounded by a shiny ring of bling, comes straight from the Wizard Series 6 SE (different, then, from the standard Series 6). So does most of the crossover, so including high-quality acoustic polypropylene caps, air-cored and ferrite-cored inductors for the uppermost driver and tweeter, and a large separate laminated-core inductor for the lower driver.

This impressively solid tech is complemented by the cool matte black or walnut finishes available for this 96.5cm-tall, 22cm-wide rear-firing bass-reflex cabinet. The foam plugs for its rear ports are now accompanied by port 'pucks' which provides an extra halfway-house bass tuning option.

In our rooms, we preferred the full-foam option, helping these speakers to reveal themselves as true and rightful heirs indeed to the Wizard crown. Hard-hitting bass lines and percussion from Queens of the Stone Age were delivered raw and unadulterated by the Wizard S6Plus, as was the trademark scream of Josh Homme's guitar. Yet they could turn on a sixpence to deliver a choral work lushly and lovingly, or turn soft and sweet for Ed Sheeran's *The A Team*.

An 'A team' these definitely are, and the best Wizards yet, without any shadow of a doubt, delivering cleaner, tighter and more extended bass, enhanced tonal accuracy across the midrange, and a sweeter, fractionally bouncier and rather more lively high-frequency presentation than previous incarnations. So, can you improve on a multiple award-winner? Yes, you can!

More info: ***www.richter.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

The best Wizards yet without any shadow of a doubt: cleaner, tighter and more extended bass, enhanced midrange accuracy, and sweeter yet more lively highs.

PSB Synchrony T800

Over in Canada, PSB Speakers' Paul Barton (his wife Sue supplied the 'S' to the brand) is renowned for being a 'sound quality first, looks second' kinda guy: an engineer who won't sacrifice sound quality for fashion or fad, nor — even when the T800s are touted as 'cost no object' designs — would he be likely to spend more money on cabinets than on the drivers and crossover networks built into them. So in a world where most large and expensive loudspeakers are curvaceous or complex, the Synchrony T800s are, well, more straightforwardly boxy, doubling down with rather blocky-looking outrigger feet at each base, though again thee are sonically enhanced by isolation feet provided by IsoAcoustics. And not to denigrate the lovely satin walnut timber veneer finish (high-gloss black also available).

But it highlights how much of a purchaser's $18,999 is going towards the sound. The T800 is a true three-way, sporting a single 25mm titanium-dome driver to deliver high frequencies, three large 8-inch drivers to deliver lows, and a single 133mm driver to deliver midrange — this uses the same carbon-fibre cone material and rubber roll surround (rubber) as the bass drivers. Meanwhile each of the drivers is in its own acoustic space within the partitioned cabinets, so the output from the rear of one driver cone cannot interfere with any other driver, either directly or because of resonances, while the different driver heights also spread the floor bounce.

Interference between the bass drivers is minimised because they do not all operate over the same low-frequency range: instead a 'transitional' bass reflex design is used, where each bass driver is high-pass filtered at a different frequency. All three operate at the lowest frequencies, but the bottom driver is rolled off earlier than the one above it, and that one earlier than the top one, so that each progressively operates over a smaller bandwidth. We are not, therefore, surprised when PSB says "*This is the most advanced amplitude-perfect Linkwitz-Riley 4th order crossover that PSB Speakers has ever utilised.*"

But we were rapidly gobsmacked by their performance. They sounded fantastically real in our listening room right from the get-go, delivering a powerful, deep and authentic bass response, a totally natural-sounding midrange, and high frequencies that reached out to the stratosphere. Whether delivering an orchestra in full flight, a pipe organ (the T800 can reveal the lowest organ pedals), *a capella* voices, or the crashes, cut-offs and gut-wrenching bass within Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', we would rate these Synchrony T800s as being among the very best-sounding loudspeakers we have ever heard, irrespective of price. At $18,999, it's no contest. More info: ***www.ambertech.com.au***

JUDGES' COMMENT

We would rate these Synchrony T800 loudspeakers among the very best-sounding we have ever heard, irrespective of price. At their actual price, it's no contest.

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JUDGES' COMMENT

These active (not streaming) speakers were designed as studio monitors, yet also deliver clean powerful performance in a home hi-fi context.

Airpulse SM200

Wireless streaming speakers are becoming ever more popular these days — and Airpulse is a brand which has several of those to offer, including the similarly-named A200 Bluetooth speakers. But these Airpulse SM200 speakers are different. The 'SM' stands for Studio Monitor, and they are indeed more intended for use in a studio (or perhaps more a home studio, given their very reasonable price of $1450 the pair). They contain their own amplification — but they are not wireless: they do not stream in any way.

So these will be suitable for a slightly different type of system. You'll need a preamplifier or a source with switching and a volume control in order to feed them, as each speaker has just a single input, available on either balanced TRS, XLR or standard unbalanced phono (see back panel, right). In today's hi-fi world that could be any number of modern components — such as our award-winning Marantz CD player, for example.

The advantage of this unusual path is a pair of speakers that performs with remarkable value, given a price which includes your power amplification. That's partly because Airpulse is a brand engineered by Phil Jones in the UK, while Beijing-based Edifier owns the Chinese company that manufactures Airpulse speakers, so delivering a combination of expertise plus high-value manufacturing.

There is no obvious scrimping on componetry. The high-frequency driver is a horn-loaded ribbon tweeter whose ribbon is made from ultra-thin pure aluminium just 0.0127mm thick, horn-loaded in a cabinet available in a variety of high-quality high-gloss piano-grade finishes including red and black. The LF driver's cone is made from hard-anodised aluminium-magnesium alloy, hardly surprising given Phil Jones' 40-year history with alloy cones — and an obsession with using them in bass guitar cabinets from his own company. The large 38mm-diameter voice coil runs cooler than smaller coils, says Jones, and so exhibits less power compression.

And that's how they sound — dynamic and powerful, with a studio monitor presentation, more linear in tone than speakers which are 'pushed' in the bass or treble, and with very low levels of distortion, revealing of any flaws in a recording. But because the two internal Class-D amplifiers are DSP-controlled, Jones has incorporated into the design both a very sophisticated high-pass filter and 'shelving' for both treble and bass, should you or your room require it. So although touted as 'monitors', the SM200s are nonetheless great-sounding speakers for home use, particularly in smaller rooms: they sound great, look great, and save on the price of separate amplification.

More info: ***audacityaustralia.com.au***

Wavetrain Cinemas
THE CLOISTER CINEMA

Our local Australian award for The Cloister Cinema may seem small beer given this project from Wavetrain Cinemas has already won CEDIA’s Best Home Cinema Global — no contest, best in the world. Of course Sound+Image readers knew all about this project well in advance of that, as we had run a full feature on this remarkable room some six months earlier. We knew rather more than the CEDIA judges, indeed, as Wavetrain’s David Moseley had briefed us in detail, including the remarkably simple request behind the commission.

“The client’s brief was simply that he wanted an amazing home cinema,” Moseley told us. “To use his own words: ‘surprise us’.”

Far from feeling bewildered, however, Wavetrain’s team was ready to jump on this very general initial guidance.

“This has become a common occurrence for us,” says Moseley. “Clients are often happy to trust us to design the cinema room. We always take the project from initial design concepts to building the cinema, and through to the final installation and calibration. We rarely repeat a design, and even if a client asks for a specific design, we will customise it to the client and the architecture of the main house.”

There was one client request beyond being surprised, however, which was that the room’s audio system should be able to play concerts at realistic levels. Wavetrain accordingly increased the SPL specifications to 100dB continuous, peaks of 110dB, and some spare.

“The bed channels of the system are able to do this with four to five dB of headroom,” says Moseley. Those who heard Wavetrain’s Sydney Show demo of Elementi Audio’s high-output active speakers will know precisely what clarity this headroom allows. But noise floor also defines the range: Wavetrain aimed for noise criterion level NC20, far below recommended domestic standards.

The full channel count here is 9.4.6, but with combined sides and two-way bass management, effectively used as 7.2.6. LCR Elementi Sirocco speakers sit behind the acoustically-transparent screen, six Elementi Zephyrs are in surround positions, and there are four Elementi Onyx 15-inch subwoofers. Then on Atmos duties there are six Pro Audio Technology in-ceiling speakers. With Dante’s audio-over-IP standard, the signal is kept digital all the way to the Elementi amplifiers, which are vertically positioned by the speakers.

With a Christie M 4K25-RGB projector illuminating a 165-inch Severtson screen, a stunning muted-gold ceiling and that sound system, this is a music and movie haven of the highest calibre.

“Anyone can design a black box in which to watch movies,” says Moseley. “Our clients dream of an escape — the whole theatrical experience.”

More info: ***wavetrain.com.au***

GOLD SOUND+IMAGE AWARD

JUDGES’ COMMENT

Our Award joins global recognition for this stunning home cinema and the full design service here delivered yet again by Sydney’s Wavetrain Cinemas.

‘GOLD’ alumni

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CUM ON FEEL THE NOIZE!

For a time in 1970s, with fun-tastic hit after mis-spelled hit they were the most popular band in Britain. But then a car crash put the brakes on, America didn't 'get' them, and as glam-rock faded so too did the band's fortunes. This is the story of Slade, in their own words.

"There were several reasons for Slade's success," the band's guitarist and fabled 'Superyob' Dave Hill informs us in a Black Country accent thick as treacle. "Most importantly, we had great songs. But the whole country recognised us as four working-class guys who'd got glammed-up, stuck their fists in the air and were telling everyone to have a good time. We were no-nonsense. We didn't take ourselves seriously, and we were proud to be British. People could relate to that, whether you were a granny, a teenager or a three-year-old. And we had a violin. Until then there were no rock records with violin."

Fronted by the foghorn-voiced Noddy Holder, always resplendent in ever-changing outfits that included a top hat bedecked with mirrors, between 1971 and 1976, Slade notched up 17 consecutive UK Top 20 hits of which six — including *Cum On Feel The Noize, Mama Weer All Crazee Now* and *Take Me Bak 'Ome* — reached No.1.

Here we speak to all four original members to get the band's full roller-coaster story — their journey to the top and back… twice — told in their own words.

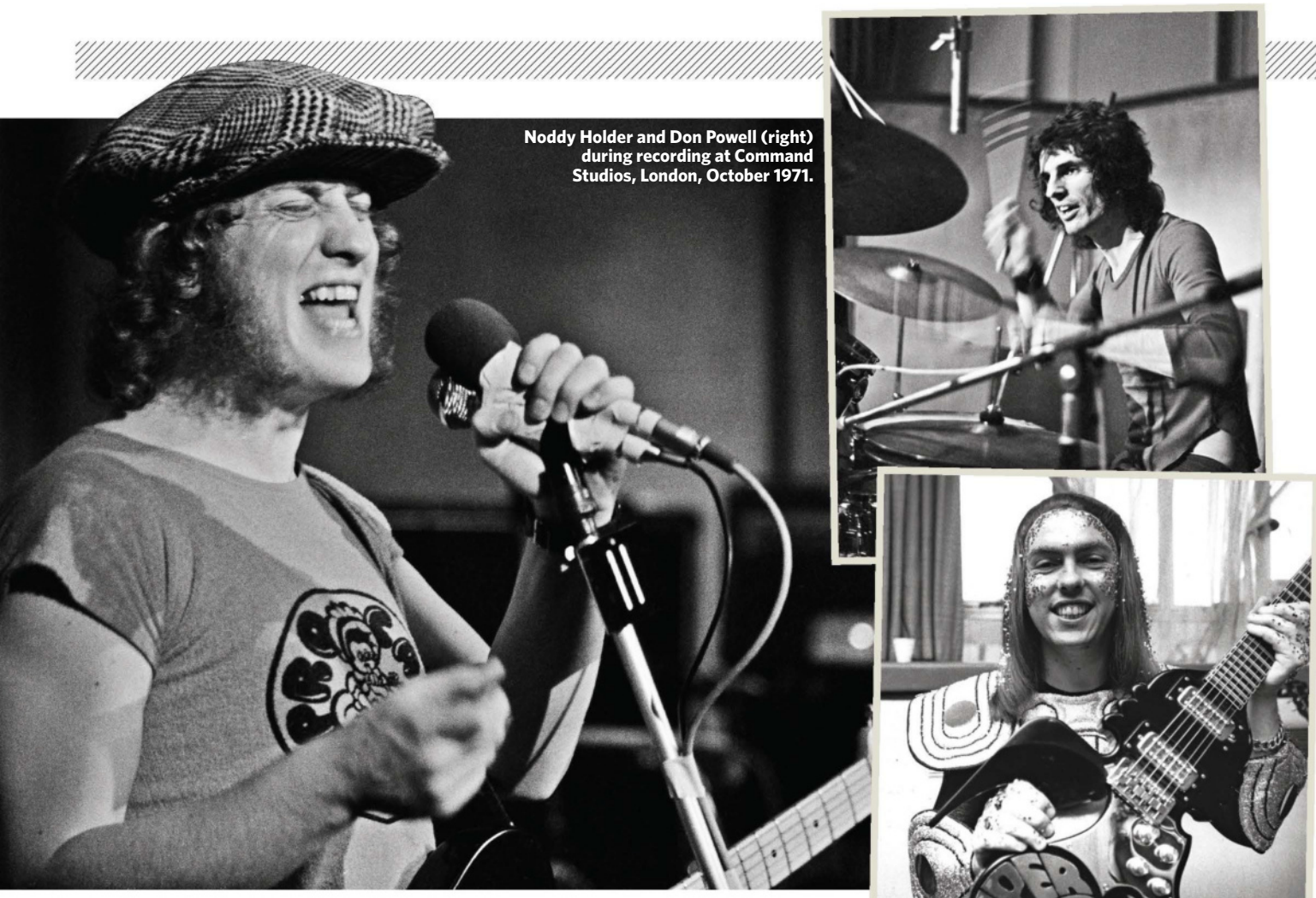
Dave Hill: I first met Noddy on a ferry heading to Germany in 1965. He was with his band Steve Brett & The Mavericks, and Don [Powell, drums] and I were with the 'N Betweens. We asked then if Nod wanted to join the 'N Betweens and he said no.

Noddy Holder: I was earning good money with the Mavericks. We were doing R&B, soul and Chuck Berry and Little Richard-type songs. The 'N Betweens were about blues and very little else.

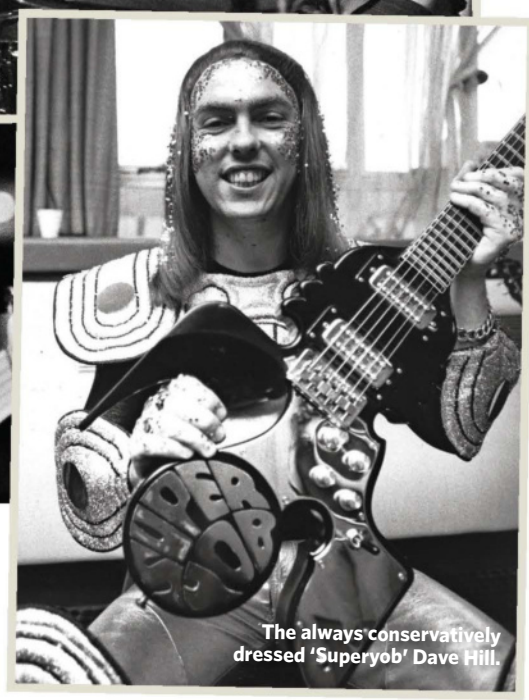
Hill: Don and I wanted to form a band that was more like The Beatles. At the auditions this very young lad arrived carrying a Paul McCartney bass. He looked about fifteen years old. He said his name was Jim Lea.

Jim Lea (bass, violin): I was still at school. I looked like a boy and I was a boy, but I played like a man. I was self-taught on bass. At the audition I was so intimidated. I had turned up with my bass in a carrier bag. They

GETTY



Noddy Holder and Don Powell (right) during recording at Command Studios, London, October 1971.



The always conservatively dressed 'Superyob' Dave Hill.

asked: "This is a professional group, where's your equipment?" I lied and said I had some, but couldn't bring it on the bus.

Hill: When he started playing I'd never seen anything like it — it was like Jimi Hendrix had got hold of a bass guitar.

Lea: I played really really fast just to show what I could do. I'm a very unconventional player; I was bending strings and using distortion. When Dave realised what was going on, he wanted it too.

Hill: Just after we found Jim, I bumped into Nod in Wolverhampton. He'd left the Mavericks. I said I was looking to form a band with three lead guitarists, including Jim who *played* like a guitarist. Nod lived opposite a pub called the Three Men In A Boat, and he suggested a 'secret rehearsal' there because the 'N Betweens already had a singer, Johnny Howells. At his front door Jim was holding a violin. I thought:"Blimmin' hell, he plays bass like Hendrix and violin too!"

"We were just four scumbags from Wolverhampton but we made it on to Top Of The Pops..."

Don Powell

Lea: When I was first introduced to Noddy at the door I misheard his name. I was calling him 'Nob' for the first three months.

Hill: We ran through some soul songs that everyone knew, and the chemistry between us was instant. It felt right.

Don Powell (drums): The first song we played was *Mr Pitiful* by Otis Redding. It just clicked straight away. We were like little kids giggling.

Lea: But with Johnny Howells that made five. Johnny decided to leave after a gig in Cornwall, and we thought about finding a replacement. When they asked my opinion, I pointed out there'd be more money as a four-piece. And that was that.

From 1966, The 'N Betweens released a run of singles that sank without trace outside of the Midlands, including a cover of the Young Rascals' *You Better Run* that was produced by Kim Fowley, the American svengali who went on to mentor The Runaways. Three years later The 'N Betweens signed to Fontana Records, who demanded a name change to Ambrose Slade. A debut album, *Beginnings*, and two further singles all flopped. And then the band met Chas Chandler, the former Animals bass player who had managed and produced Jimi Hendrix.

Lea: Kim Fowley saw us at a club in London. He was six feet tall with a feather boa. He got us to record *You Better Run* but, coincidentally Robert Plant had just recorded the same song with his band Listen. Neither was a hit.

Holder: Despite the knock-backs we never thought of stopping. We knew we were good. From day one we were a great live band, and that carried us, and being paid cash-in-hand for gigs got us through some hard times.

Powell: If one song failed we'd just go on to the next one. Splitting up never even entered our minds.

Hill: We'd had no idea of how to get into the charts. We were going into shops and buying our own records, but that got us nowhere. Chas Chandler took us on, and among the first things he did was tell us to become skinheads. He said: "You'll make millions, you'll be stars." My reaction was: "Oh no! I love my hair." Skinheads were into ska music,

TV times: Slade performing *Cum On Feel The Noize* on *Top Of The Pops* in 1973.

"The miners, gravediggers, electricians and bakers were all on strike, and the telly was going off at 10 p.m. Glam-rock was a response to that."

Noddy Holder

and there's us playing rock with a violin player. It was never going to work. So Chas let us re-grow our hair. That's where I got the famous fringe I had. We had been ending our gigs with the Chuck Berry-[popularised] song *Get Down And Get With It*, and Chas said to record it. The boot-stamping helped to define our sound.

Holder: Nobody liked the name Ambrose Slade, so when Chas suggested simplifying it we were relieved. Chas could be a hard taskmaster, and one day he told us: "You've got to write your own next single." He paired Jim and I together. Jim came to my mum's house with his violin, and we knocked off *Coz I Luv You* in twenty minutes.

Hill: When Chas heard it he said: "That'll be top three, definitely."

Powell: We were just four scumbags from Wolverhampton but we made it on to *Top Of The Pops*, and it stampeded to Number One. After that, Jim and Nod just rattled them off.

Holder: I had scribbled down the lyrics in Black Country phonetic spelling, and that became a gimmick. Before we knew it we had this treadmill of hits. Chas was constantly on Jim's back for the next single. But we'd go on *Top Of The Pops,* and the following day the whole country would be talking about us.

Hill: A lot of effort went into my *Top Of The Pops* outfits, especially the 'metal nun'. I think Stevie Marriott nicknamed that one.

Holder: Jim said: "I'm not going on television with you dressed like that." He actually walked off photo sessions when he saw what Dave and I were wearing.

Hill: My response was always the same: "You write 'em, I'll sell 'em."

When *Mama Weer All Crazee Now* became their third UK chart topper, Slade's graft and self-belief had paid off. They were the most popular band in Britain. But just as things were looking rosy, on 4 July 1973, drummer Don Powell was involved in a car crash. It left him unconscious for six days, and his fiancée Angela Morris was killed. In the aftermath, the band almost tore apart.

Powell: Even today I've got no memory of what happened. Your brain switches off, and that's probably a good thing. Afterwards the band had to put up with a lot from me.

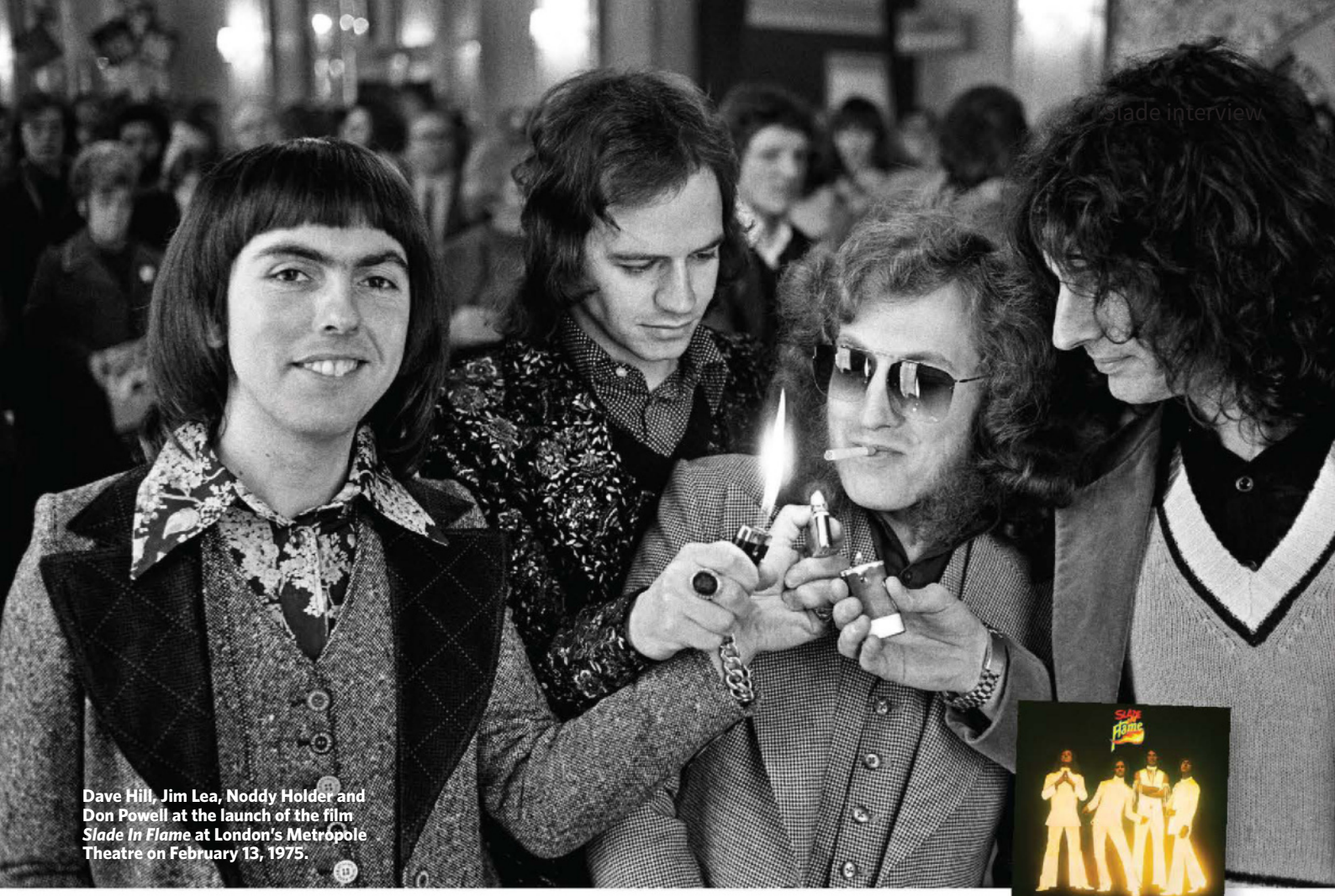
Lea: The crash affected Don's memory. One night, leading into *Skweeze Me, Pleeze Me*, he said: "Jim, I don't remember how it goes." I told him to count four beats and just keep going.

Hill: We responded with a song that we thought could become a moderate hit. But it took on a life of its own. I loved that *Merry Xmas Everybody* doesn't have jingle bells plastered across it; it's a song about family, presents and fun. That song lifted a nation.

Lea: Nobody in the band wanted to record that song. When I first played it to Noddy he told me to go away and have sex with myself. But after Nod added his lyrics it came to life.

Powell: Ah yes, 'that song' as we call it. It's true, nobody wanted to release it. But Chas told us: "I don't care what you lot say, this is coming out."

Holder: The miners, gravediggers, electricians and bakers were all on strike, and the telly was going off at 10 p.m. Glam-rock was a response. *Merry Xmas* was the height of it all. I still can't believe we sold 350,000 copies in a single day.



Dave Hill, Jim Lea, Noddy Holder and Don Powell at the launch of the film *Slade In Flame* at London's Metropole Theatre on February 13, 1975.

Powell: It went gold on the first day of release. In an elevator this bloke said: "I'm so fed up of this record." When I turned around and looked at him he went blood-red.

Lea: Early on I'd instigated a conversation with the guys about how we'd deal with fame when it came. We'd been driving around with no hits for five years, and we vowed to stay exactly the same. Everyone agreed with that.

Powell: The four of us were all living with our mums and dads at the time, and each of us kept the others' feet on the ground.

Holder: Yes, we were making lots of money, but don't forget that tax [for top earners] was at ninety-three pence in the pound.

Hill: In 1973, outside of America we were probably the biggest band in the world. We had ticked all the boxes. It was time to try something new.

The first 'something new' was the band's film, *Slade In Flame*, a dark semi-autobiographical piece about a fictional group called Flame. At around the same time, Slade's singles became mellower and less gonzoid. And it was decided the time was ripe to take a genuine crack at the potentially lucrative US market.

Holder: America was the golden goose, but you had to break the place by touring.

Powell: Our records were too heavy for AM stations and not quite hip enough for FM.

Holder: We slogged and slogged there for two years, but it didn't translate into record sales. Big bands that came out later on, like Van Halen, loved us. Even Kurt Cobain. But it didn't work for us until the following decade.

Hill: Kiss were there in the crowd, watching us and gathering ideas. I mean, listen to *Crazy, Crazy Nights*.

"In 1973, outside of America we were probably the biggest band in the world."

Dave Hill

Scene of the crash that left Don Powell badly injured and killed his girlfriend.

Lea: I'll tell you who else was in the audience — the Ramones.

Hill: We were monster big [at home] but [US] audiences didn't know what to make of us. With our platform boots we looked like we'd dropped out of the sky. When we got home the press called us Yankee doodle dandies. Some fans said we'd deserted them. British people don't like that, do they?

Holder: We came back a changed band. There was no point in re-living glam-rock, and top hats with mirrors.

Hill: *Everyday* came out in early 1974, our equivalent of [The Beatles'] *Yesterday*, a more reflective side of Slade. *Far Far Away* and *How Does It Feel* were also different for us. [DJ] Alan Freeman said he really wanted to hear an album of Slade songs that sounded like *Far Far Away*, but sadly we never made that album.

Lea: As non-actors, *Slade In Flame* [from 1975, the soundtrack album of which included *How Does It Feel* and *Far Far Away*] was a big risk, especially as the subject matter was so dark, but in recent times it has received a lot of credit. The

BBC's Mark Kermode called it "the *Citizen Kane* of rock movies".

Holder: Suddenly, although we could still fill smaller venues, we weren't coming up with hits. We knew they were good songs, but they weren't selling like they had done before.

Lea: When you're used to your records getting to Number One, Number Two is a miss. That presents a lot of pressure.

In August 1980, the Reading Festival threw Slade a lifeline. With Ozzy Osbourne cancelling three days out, the promoters rang Slade, even though by this point Dave Hill had left the band and was renting out his Rolls-Royce for weddings.

Hill: I needed to generate some form of business. Chas had to talk me into doing the Reading Festival, so what happened that day was a great relief for me.

Holder: We had no great expectations. We'd all but broken up. Because it was short notice we had no car park or backstage passes.

Lea: It was as though we were in a cowboy movie. It was hot and there was lots of dust. It felt like we were Clint Eastwood. People looked at us as if to say: "It's Slade, risen from the dead."

"The success at Reading gave us something to cling on to. The following year we did Monsters Of Rock, supporting AC/DC."

Jim Lea

Holder: We'd been warned that we wouldn't get an encore but, fucking hell, we tore the place up. So they sent us back out. I asked what everyone wanted to hear — we weren't going to do *Merry* fucking *Christmas* in August — I got *them* to sing it. The next week we were on the front of all the music papers.

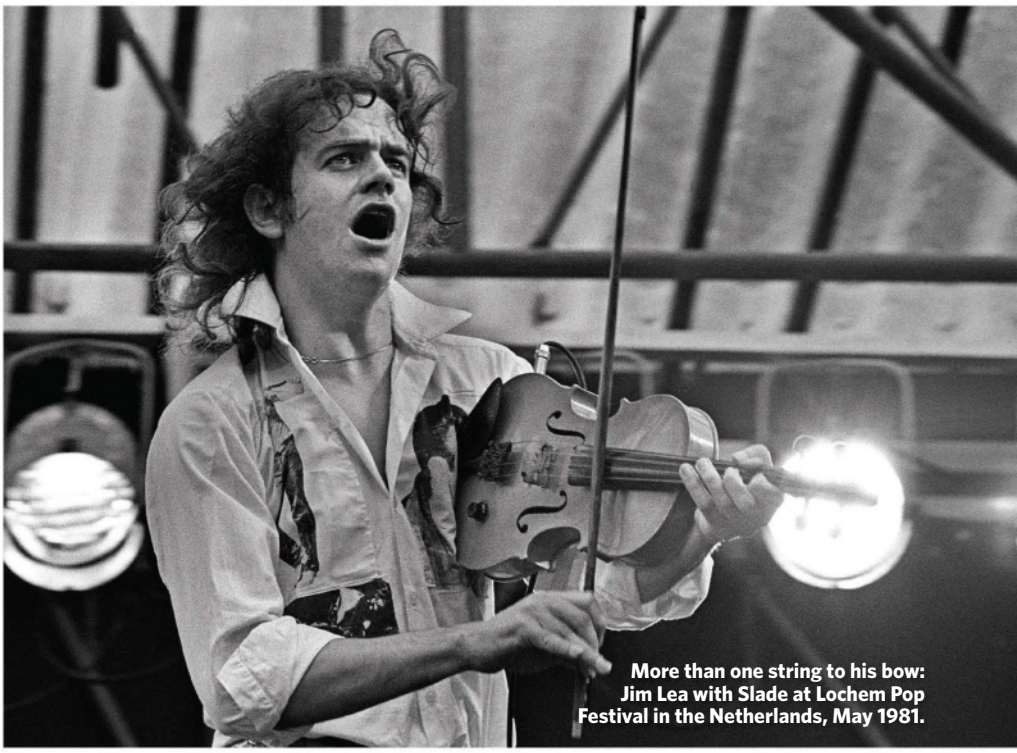
Lea: The success at Reading gave us something to cling on to. The following year we did Monsters Of Rock, supporting AC/DC.

Hill: We returned with *We'll Bring The House Down* and *Lock Up Your Daughters*. That period in our history was nice. We'd come out of being dressed up like Christmas trees, and now we were a bit more rocker-y. We toured with Whitesnake and we wanted to appeal to the Donington crowd.

Holder: We thought we were going to have a Number One with *My Oh My* [in 1983], which would have given us Christmas Number Ones ten years apart. But although it topped the charts all over Europe, in the UK we were beaten to it by The Flying Pickets. That was disappointing.

Hill: Suddenly, CBS in Los Angeles began paying interest in us. Quiet Riot had had a hit with *Cum On Feel The Noize*, and it

Feeling the noize: Noddy Holder and Dave Hill with Slade at the 1981 Monsters Of Rock.



More than one string to his bow: Jim Lea with Slade at Lochem Pop Festival in the Netherlands, May 1981.

made them wonder: "What are Slade up to?" Sharon Osbourne became our manager and *Run Runaway* went Top 40 in the States. Americans liked its Scottishness. We thought it hilarious when interviewers asked whether the four of us really lived in the big castle that featured in its video.

Against the odds, Slade were poised for a much-belated breakthrough in the US. But when Jim Lea developed hepatitis C they were forced to return home after playing just the opening night of supporting Ozzy Osbourne. Slade would never quite recover. They retired from the road in 1984, and effectively signed off three years later with the album *You Boyz Make Big Noize*, although a final 1991 hit, *Radio Wall Of Sound*, proved there was still juice in the tank.

Hill: As time went by, things just weren't the same any more. There was a sense of running things down. The record company didn't re-sign us. Without touring, for me there didn't seem to be any point in being a band. Nod didn't want to do it any more, and I understood that.

Powell: The band had run its course. After so long of being together, that felt strange.

Holder: When bands break up it's usually to do with five reasons — egos, money, drink and drugs, women or musical differences. In Slade's case it was all of the above. Though Dave and Don were paid for performances, Jim and I received more as writers. That became an issue when there was less money floating around. We hadn't been getting on for a while, and then Jim started to want more and more control in the studio.

"When bands break up it's usually egos, money, drink and drugs, women or musical differences. In Slade's case it was all of the above."

Noddy Holder

Lea: Someone else told me he [Holder] had said that. But it's not true.

Holder: My wife filed for a divorce and my dad was extremely ill, so I told the band I wasn't going to tour any more. Slade started out as a gang of four happy-go-lucky guys, and it wasn't that any more. When it stopped being fun, that was it for me.

Hill: For the first few years I used to think there was a chance of reuniting with Nod. But his mind's made up.

Powell: It'll never happen again. It would soil our reputation.

Holder: The way things are now between Dave and Don [back in February, Hill sacked Powell from the current, post-Holder/Lea line-up of Slade by email], it'll never happen. I couldn't do four or five gigs in a row singing like I used to. I don't think *any* of us could manage it. We're in our seventies. And I know that we wouldn't get on. Twelve or thirteen years ago there was talk of one final tour, but everybody fell out at the meeting. The only time I hear from Jim now is a solicitor's letter when I'm accused of saying something.

Powell: Things are a little easier with Dave now, and I'm planning to form my own line-up of Slade.

Hill: I'm an entertainer, and people still want to hear those songs. There seems to be interest in getting me over to America again. I'm sad at falling out with Don, and it's hard to discuss without stirring up further animosity, but I'll keep on going. I still love it as much as I did picking up my first guitar at 13. — *Dave Ling*

Slade's **Cum On Feel The Hitz** is out now via BMG.

ALAMY

MISERY'S HOBBLING SCENE

1990

People never much worried about their ankles until 1990's *Misery*. "I actually have the Misery game," said host Billy Crystal in his opening monologue of the 1991 Academy Awards. "It's a home hobbling kit."

Yes, that scene in Rob Reiner's adap of Stephen King's bestseller made an instant impact — much like Annie Wilkes' swinging sledgehammer on Paul Sheldon's ankles, you might say — and the mere thought of it still induces sharp intakes of breath more than 30 years later.

And yet in the novel it was so much worse, with Annie cutting Paul's left foot clean off before cauterising the stump with a propane torch. Screenwriter William Goldman loved what he was reading, saying, "I never dreamt such a thing was possible, and I knew I had to write the movie" (you wouldn't credit that he'd previously teamed with Reiner on *The Princess Bride*). But he was on his own. Bette Midler, approached to play Annie before Kathy Bates made the part her own, said, "I didn't want to cut off someone's foot", while James Caan was low on the list to play the famous author trapped in the remote home of his number-one fan. William Hurt, Michael Douglas, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Robert Redford, Harrison Ford, Warren Beatty, Richard Dreyfuss, Dustin Hoffmann, Kevin Kline… all got cold feet when offered the role.

Likewise, slated director George Roy Hill (*Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid, The Sting*) passed on the gig because he couldn't wrap his head around calling "action!" on the axing. Reiner, who was producing at his Castle Rock company, stepped in, and decided to soften the troublesome scene as he wished for Paul to emerge victorious from his personal nightmare, and felt that losing a foot was "too high a price". The solution? Have Annie wedge a block of wood between Paul's ankles and snap both of them with a sledgehammer.

KNB effects maestro Howard Berger was brought in to make gelatin casts of Caan's legs, wire armatures employed to pivot the feet to sickening angles. The armatures stopped working after a few takes, so Berger stood just out of shot and yanked on a fishing line. Bates, meanwhile, cried throughout the filming of the scene. "She's so anti-violence," explains Caan, adding, "The hobbling scene was kind of horrible for all of us." Traumatised viewers included...

Jamie Graham

ALICE BAXLEY

GREEN DAY *Saviors*

Punk-pop masters return to formula, sprinkling Gallagher.

Once more back to basics, dear friends. Green Day may have strayed a little from the path to *Welcome To Paradise* over the past three decades — into punk opera, grandiose rock balladry or, as on 2020's last album 'Father Of All Motherfuckers', garage rock'n'roll — but eventually they always steer back into their melodic punk hammer lane. Frontman Billie Joe Armstrong has described 'Saviors', their fourteenth album, as bridging the gap between 1994's 'Dookie' and 2004's 'American Idiot', and there it certainly sits, part hurtling punkarama, part political rock drama. It's a style that Green Day pioneered and epitomise, and they don't wander too far from it.

Opener and first single *The American Dream Is Killing Me*, held over from 'Father...' to avoid making that album too political, firmly stakes out the territory. 'My country under siege,' Armstrong sings in his gung-ho punk bawl, pinpointing the issues of unemployment, homelessness and conspiracy acceptance, over swashbuckling stadium punk and chamber-pop interludes. But this touch of American Idiot political charge doesn't stampede across the album. *Strange Days Are Here To Stay*, *Living In The '20s* and the full-throttle *Coma City* — power-punk tracks as catchy as Green Day have ever been — reference widespread racism, gun violence and the billionaire space race (or "assholes in space", as Armstrong puts it succinctly). Otherwise, 'Saviors' is as personal as a therapy confession.

Emotionally the record ricochets from the Weezer-like meet-cute *Bobby Sox*, full of first-flush romance, to far darker fare. *One Eyed Bastard* is pure vengeance, a wronged Armstrong declaring 'vendetta is a friend of mine' and telling his adversary to 'get on your knees, you are kissing my ring'. Dilemma appears to confront the demons at the bottom of the bottle: 'I was sober, now I'm drunk again… I don't wanna be a dead man walking,' Armstrong sings, imitating at times a 1950s red-eyed crooner. He ends up, on the theatrical finale *Fancy Sauce*, bouncing from the walls of a 'rubber room' for his own protection, punk's most famous basket case finally tipping over the edge.

If the record largely reads like a howl of desperation at all political and personal control being lost, though, it sounds very much in cruise. When it veers stylistically from melodic punk's centre line it's only as far as dreamy folk pop or, quite charmingly, Oasis; the title track could be an emo rewrite of *Some Might Say*, and *Father To A Son*, a heartfelt tribute to Armstrong's children, rises to a Beatledelic climax as if auditioning for the next Liam Gallagher solo album. For the most part, though, 'Saviors' is the sound of reassuring rebellion from the midst of the 21st-century breakdown.

Mark Beaumont

ROBBY KRIEGER AND THE SOUL SAVAGES The Players Club

Blissed out, beautifully rendered jazz free-form from The Doors guitarist.

It must have been a rare treat to wander past the Love Street Studios in Glendale last summer and hear The Doors' Robby Krieger and his band's easy, languid jams piercing the blue California sky. At points it's jazzy, then psychedelic, then with the sort of undulating groove that makes you wonder what it might have sounded like if Booker T jammed with the Average White Band.

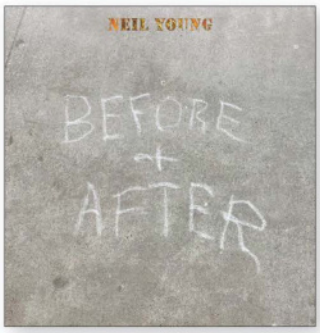
Krieger, unsurprisingly, can make most anything sing, at points dropping that deft, ringing *LA Woman* tone through the floor to give it a Zappa ring. It's a rare and clever thing, much like the rest of this album, not least in the lilting *Math Problem* or the airy *A Day In L.A.*

Philip Wilding

NEIL YOUNG

Before + After

Only one new song, but a fireside renewal of oldies and goldies..

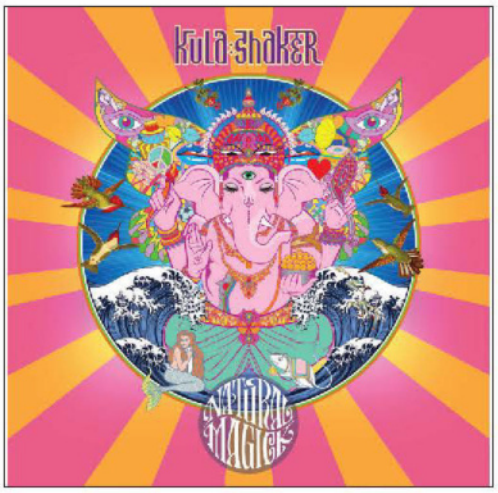


Another month, another Neil Young album. This one is a little different, though. For his new album, Young covers a variety of songs from his vast back catalogue — from Buffalo Springfield's plaintive *Burned* (1966) to his recent plea for harmony *Don't Forget Love* (2021) — on acoustic, solo, one song merging into the next. The overall effect is hypnotic, mesmeric — a musical montage that has no start or end point.

This is Young's forty-fifth studio album, co-produced with Lou Adler (think Carole King's 1972 album 'Tapestry'), and his flame shows no sign of dimming. Old favourites such as *Mr. Soul* and *Comes A Time*, alongside lesser-known cuts, become almost mantra-like, droning and highly resonant, imbued with the aching of years. *Birds* stands out, with its cascading harmonies, as does *A Dream That Can Last* (from 1994's Kurt Cobain-inspired 'Sleeps With Angels'), and there's one new song, *If You Got Love*, that wails like a good 'un.

So perhaps not the new studio recording some were hoping for, but a fascinating and compelling deep dive into Young's past.

Everett True



KULA SHAKER Natural Magick

Into the mystic...

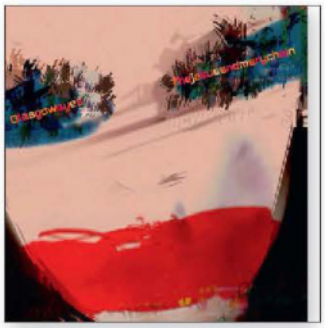
Shaker-in-chief Crispian Mills was only a twinkle in the cosmos when The Beatles decamped to India in February 1968, a fruitful period in which they wrote around 30 songs and introduced Indian spirituality to Western rock music.

'Natural Magick', the seventh album from Kula Shaker and the first in 25 years from the band's original line-up, continues the fascination with psyched-up mysticism, laced with protest songs against the Blue Meanies of the modern world. The furious opening blast of *Gaslighting*, with shades of Gil Scott-Heron's T*he Revolution Will Not Be Televised* repurposed for the social-media age, gives way to the more celebratory *Waves* and *Happy Birthday*, laden with sitar and finger cymbals. There's a whiff of 'things were better in the 90s' along with the incense, but infectious tunes save the day, notably on *Whistle And I Will Come*, and *Something Dangerous*, which is reminiscent of Village Green-era Kinks. **Claudia Elliott**

THE JESUS & MARY CHAIN

Glasgow Eyes

Legendary Scottish noiseniks prove they're not done roughing up rock'n'roll yet.



Almost 40 years on from 'Psychocandy', and seven since their revitalising last album 'Damage And Joy', the Mary Chain remain one of few genuinely subversive forces in alternative rock. Leaning hard into their Suicide and Velvets roots, this eighth album sees Jim Reid bring his withering scowl to bear on further catalogues of loves (rebel rock'n'roll from the Stones to the Pistols, classic American culture, Churchill) and hates (drugs, club music, poverty, political elites). Meanwhile, between moments of melodic art-rock serenity or tension, brother William conjures some of his most abrasive and corroded sonics, often through radioactive guitars or screaming electronic wires. *Chemical Animal* is not so much a wall as an electrified fence of sound, *Pure Poor* is pure degenerate dirge, and the pounding, metallic *Venal Joy Fast* is the perfect motorik soundtrack to Jim's images of crawling through glass and pissing on fire. Their evocations of religious and rock'n'roll mythologies have begun to include the self — *JAMCOD* relives their near-murderous 1998 split in the language of a drug overdose, and the record ends with a burst of Velvets fuzz-rock titled *Hey Lou Reid* – but it's only fitting on a record that burnishes their legend with such sizzling acid. **Mark Beaumont**

TOM OLDHAM

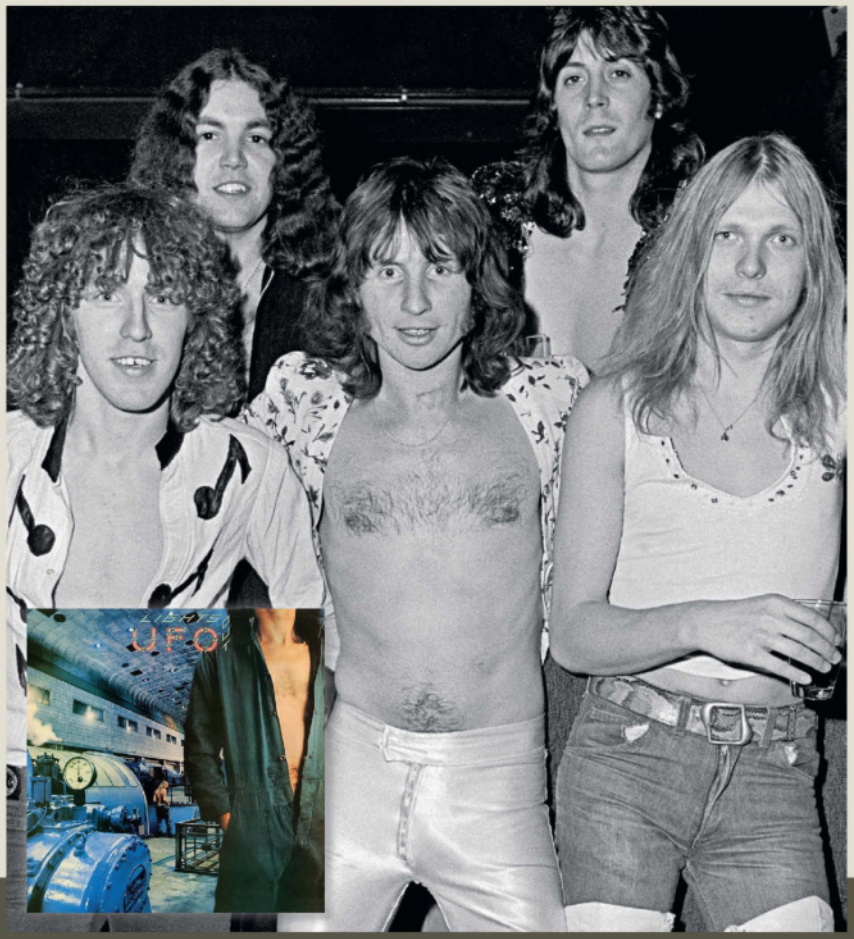
LIAM GALLAGHER JOHN SQUIRE

First fruits of the two-man collaboration: hugely enjoyable.

Collaborations don't always work. When you have too many big names in a group, sometimes the result is more like standing on the toes of giants than standing on their shoulders: the combination of two or more rock legends often tends to dilute the result, not enhance it. In this case, however, it all seems to have turned out all right. Maybe it's because Liam Gallagher (vocals) is a fan of John Squire (guitar) and so is on his best behaviour. Or maybe it's because John Squire has got someone he can work off — after all, it's the first time he's worked with a singer. Whatever it is, the combination of Gallagher's untrammeled vocal blasts — he sings on this record like if John Lennon was a cannon — and Squire's enormous slabs of riffs works perfectly. It's very stompy, which is a good thing, and sounds throughout like the final days of late psychedelia as it turned into 1968-era heavy rock: very heavy, and far from humble. True, there's the usual Lego aspect of all post-modern guitar music: if you think you've heard this song before, you have. *Mars To Liverpool* stomps along like a dazed Godzilla on a riff that's often similar to Lou Reed's version of *Rock'n'Roll*, while *Just Another Rainbow* sounds like every Liam vocal thrown into a blender with large parts of The Beatles' *Rain*. Meanwhile, *I'm A Wheel* introduces us to the third coming as it asks the unwanted question: 'What if Iggy Pop's *Nightclubbing* turned into a long and turgid blues number?'

All of which makes this album sound a little derivative, which at times it is. But it's full of twists and turns that are Squire's own, where he seems unable to decide which riff to play so plays all the ones he knows at once instead. Meanwhile, Gallagher is infused with the pure enjoyment of making music for fun and sings his enormous heart out. And with songs like *Make It Up As You Go Along* ('Thank you for your thoughts and prayers and fuck you too') and the self-explanatory *I'm So Bored*, there's a freshness in both words and attitude that's more than welcome in a world of heritage and excessive respect.

Until the long-awaited collaboration between Noel Gallagher and Ian Brown emerges, feast your ears on this hugely enjoyable album. *David Quantick*



GETTY

UFO *Lights Out – 2024 Remaster, Deluxe*

Lights Out, all out...

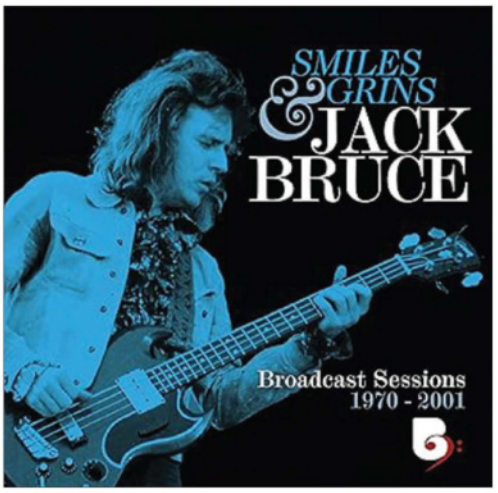
Don't be duped by the PR bluster: "Lights Out is UFO's seminal breakthrough album." That honour, natch, goes to 1979 double-live masterwork 'Strangers In The Night'. Additionally, the claim that the title track offers "an urgent portrayal of dystopian London" on a par with The Clash's *White Riot* is a claim too far. Yes, *Lights Out* (the song) might at its core be about the Notting Hill riots of '76. Its anti-authoritarian vibe is undeniable. But equally — and you can imagine frontman Phil Mogg saying this, with a wicked glint in his eye — it could've been inspired by the singer's hunt for a Zippo after he unwittingly spilled a can of Stella over his, er, fuse box. Certainly, album-cover design supremos Hipgnosis plumped for the electric option, depicting Mogg and guitarist Michael Schenker lurking inside London's Battersea Power Station.

Regardless, 'Lights Out' is a very fine album indeed. It reached No.23 in the US upon its release in '77, but surprisingly didn't trouble the UK Top 50. Its lush sonics, by producer Ron Nevision, are a big improvement on previous flaccid efforts by Leo Lyons, and are further improved here. *Too Hot To Handle* and the twinkling *Love To Love* have more than stood the test of time, and the less renowned *Electric Phase* is a chunky personal fave, but a dodgy cover of *Love's Alone Again Or* smacks of a cheroot-chewing exec demanding: "We need a hit single from you boys."

This remaster comes in two-CD or three-LP formats and includes an April '77 show from London's Roundhouse. The gig is vivacious and vital, despite the recent culling of *Boogie For George* (a track that makes Status Quo sound like Supertramp) from the set. The three bonus tracks are CD-only, a sure sign of a fading format. Sadly, said tracks are barely worth having, being edits of *Too Hot To Handle* and *Try Me* along with a rough acoustic version of *Alone Again Or*.

The vinyl is the gold. Given the relatively small number of tracks spread across three 12-inch platters, the grooves are so deep and wide they could double up as a Scalextric set. Thus the sonics are out of this world, as deep and resonant as Mogg's tonsils at the top of their game.

Geoff Barton



JACK BRUCE
Smiles And Grins, Broadcast Sessions 1970-2001

Jack of all trades

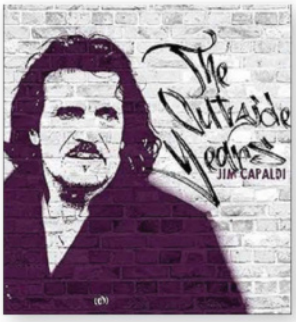
Best known as the bassist/vocalist with Cream and for being one of the most celebrated bassists of that era, Jack Bruce deserves more recognition as a songwriter. His art is demonstrated amply on this 4-CD, 42-track collection of radio sessions plus some TV audio and video, spanning three decades, taking in rock, blues, jazz and more with various collaborator collectives.

Highlights include the smouldering *We're Going Wrong*, powerful in its simplicity, an elegant reading of Bruce's (with lyricist Pete Brown) songwriting peak *Theme For An Imaginary Western*, and, of particular interest, an un-broadcast 1970 session for German TV show 'Beat Club' by Lifetime (Bruce, Tony Williams, John McLaughlin and Larry Young) that sparkles with virtuoso chops.

Some of the music might sound like it was recorded on a mobile phone with a knackered mike, but put that to one side and there's plenty here to paint a revealing and colourful portrait of Bruce the songwriter, and performer outside the studio. **Paul Henderson**

JIM CAPALDI
The Outside Years

Remastered 4-CD compilation of one-time Traffic man's solo output....



Capaldi's death at just 60 in 2005 robbed rock of a prodigious talent. A fiendishly funky drummer and philosophically-minded songwriter — as well as a piratical purveyor of good vibes — his contributions with Traffic alone established him as one of rock's greats. His subsequent solo career delivered more than its fair share of treasures. Spanning 1993-2004, this lovingly-curated collection includes studio albums 'Living On the Outside' and 'Poor Boy Blue', along with 35 mostly unreleased tracks including out-takes, demos and live recordings. A demo of *Love's Got A Hold On Me* featuring George Harrison will set fans' pulses racing, but it's a scorching 2002 Cologne live set that reminds you that Capaldi in full flow was a match for anyone. **Paul Moody**

CARTER USM
1992: The Love Album

Bittersweet, optimistically Eurocentric '90s chart topper gets boxed.

1992 was Carter's year, and they knew it. Their previous album '30 Something' had climbed as high as No.8 in the big boys' chart. Not only had it captured the zeitgeist for the unprecedentedly-acquisitive Slade/Jam record-buying demographic who were now, quite literally, 30 something (i.e. just hitting that cynical, politically-aware age of nostalgic self-examination that the tears-in-the-beers duo so skilfully dealt in), but the cheekily likeable Sarf London duo were also the very best live band in the country (witness this set's newly included Glastonbury performance).

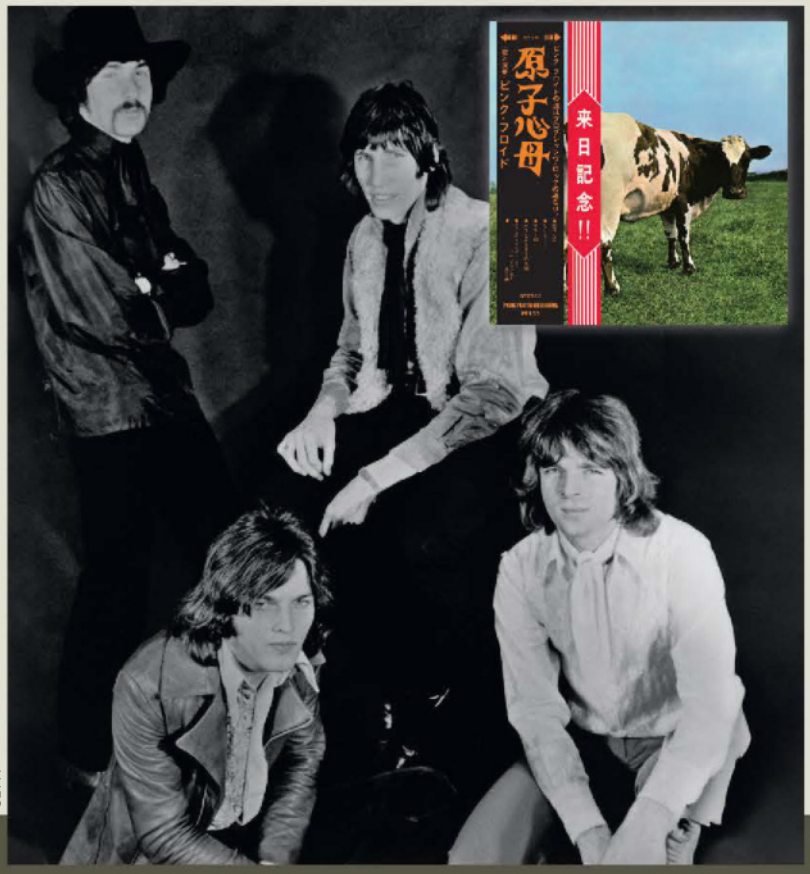
Carter USM (essentially two blokes, a fringe, some shorts and a drum machine) may have given the impression that they were easy-going everymen, but they knew their own worth and were steelily determined to seize their day, so they pretty much duplicated the feel of '30 Something' while ramping everything up to 11. T*he Only Living Boy In New Cross* was as obvious a hit as *After The Watershed* had been before it. Melodically, dynamically flawless, it was clever, socially astute and emotional, if arguably not a patch on *While You Were Out*, a fabulously personal anthem for touring musicians' long-suffering road widows. But it's the closing one-two of *Skywest And Crooked* and *The Impossible Dream* that's the exquisitely overblown gold here. There were even hopes in the ranks that the latter cover would provide the pair with a Christmas No.1 single. A ludicrous ambition for a track released in May, but they could dream.

A neat package, completed by a packed CD of B-sides and a *Top Of The Pops*-heavy DVD. **Ian Fortnum**

KATE BUSH
Hounds Of Love

Great album, same master, new boxes.

Three new editions of Kate's most famous album qualify as curiosities rather than essentials, offering no new music nor even remastering, instead creating what Bush describes as "a hybrid of an album and a piece of artwork". A 'Baskerville' edition brings new artwork from design studio Timorous Beasties, with a 'Pulse'-like LED light inside the gatefold, while two 'The Boxes Of Lost At Sea' editions each contain one side of the album, a UV illustration on white vinyl, and again, an LED. Mmm...



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PINK FLOYD *Atom Heart Mother (S.E.)*

Special Edition love for a relatively unloved Floyd album.

Famously, Pink Floyd claim not to be too fond of their fifth studio album (their first to go to No.1 in the UK). "A really awful and embarrassing record," said Roger Waters. "[It was] a load of rubbish," said David Gilmour, in a rare show of solidarity.

Released in October 1970, 'Atom Heart Mother' — Floyd's first album not to have the band or their name anywhere in the album packaging — makes for odd but compelling listening 50 years on, and must be one of the oddest albums to top the UK chart.

The first side/half is a six-part instrumental orchestral suite, spliced together from Gilmour's layered guitar, choral vocals, pulse-beat keyboards and various sound samples. Due to studio restrictions, Waters and Nick Mason played bass and drums for the entire 23-minute track in one take. There's plenty to explore and spark the imagination here, though, not least because in its dense, encrusted magical melee the listener can hear distinct traces of what was to come — specifically, the side-long *Echoes* on follow-up album 'Meddle', and various sounds and motifs later used on the monumental 'The Dark Side Of The Moon'. (Not the French horn-led brass sections. Which are ace, by the way.)

The second side/half begins exquisitely with Waters's ballad *If* — channelling the Velvet Underground through a folk filter into a quite beautiful lament — followed by the Kinksian *Summer '68* and a forgettable Beatles-esque Gilmour track, before trailing off into the frankly unlistenable 11-minute *Alan's Psychedelic Breakfast* — a 'humorous' track featuring roadie Alan Styles discussing and eating breakfast. In fairness, some fans list this among their favourite Floyd songs, loving its doleful English whimsy. There again, fans will love anything, right? Either way, it's a rather peculiar end to a rather peculiar album.

The reissue comes as a lovely two-disc package in a seven-inch gatefold sleeve, containing the album on CD, and a Blu-ray disc featuring a (long thought lost) concert film of Floyd playing at Japan's Hakone Aphrodite in August 1971 and a behind-the-scenes mini-documentary. The package includes a replica Hakone Aphrodite pamphlet, show poster, etc., and a 60-page photo book. *Everett True*

CLASSIC TRACK

The Who – *Baba O'Riley*

1971

The opening track to the Who's fifth album is a classic, but it had a history – as part of Townshend's recently-revisited 'Lifehouse'.

There seemed no end to Pete Townshend's ambition come the turn of the 1970s. Not content with the success of sprawling rock opera 'Tommy', The Who's creative linchpin started work on an even more demanding project. The complex storyline of 'Lifehouse' — set in a dystopian future where rock'n'roll has ceased to exist and society is enslaved by technology — involved theatre, astrology, philosophy and film. It was too much for Townshend to realise in the end, leading to a nervous breakdown. But he was able to salvage parts of 'Lifehouse' for 'Who's Next', the band's 1971 studio album.

Baba O'Riley was one of those pieces. Beginning with a loop from Townshend's favourite new toy, the ARP synthesizer, the song grows wings with the introduction of piano and Keith Moon's crashing drums. By the time Townshend's fat power chords have entered the fray and Roger Daltrey makes his opening gambit — 'Out here in the fields/I fight for my meals' — The Who are in full flight.

Its title brings together two prime influences. Meher Baba was the Indian spiritual master whose teachings had become central to Townshend's life, while minimalist musician Terry Riley had turned his head with his wondrous modal compositions. In *Baba O'Riley*'s original form within 'Lifehouse', under the working title *Teenage Wasteland*, the protagonists are groups of itinerant teens who live outside the framework of society.

The finished version, however, was inspired by The Who's experience at the Woodstock Festival in August 1969. Townshend remembered "the absolute desolation of teenagers at Woodstock, where audience members were strung out on acid and 20 people had brain damage. The irony was that some listeners took the song to be a teenage celebration. 'Teenage Wasteland, yes! We're all wasted!' "

Townshend himself takes over on vocals during the bridge: 'Don't cry/Don't raise your eye/It's only teenage wasteland.' And as the song surges towards its climax, guest Dave Arbus (of Bristol proggers East Of Eden) adds a violin solo that accelerates into a folk jig and a suitably breathless finale.

Baba O'Riley is simply one of the defining moments in The Who's recorded catalogue. Even Townshend admits to having a soft spot for it. As he once told *Rolling Stone*: "I just hope that on my deathbed I don't embarrass myself by asking someone, 'Can you pass me my guitar? And will you run the backing tape of Baba O'Riley? I just want to do it one more time.'" +

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WELCOME

Our buying guide is based on the Sound+Image Awards presented each year. Now fully updated with the latest winners from our 2024 Awards, and also, as an EISA member, including recent EISA winners, it's the ultimate guide to the best audio & AV products available on the market today. See the key above to understand which products won what and when...

2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

Streaming music players

Streaming now appears in all manner of products, but these award-winning products are sources made just for streaming. And not just for Spotify; these streamers handle high resolution files from the internet or your network for the highest of performance.

CAMBRIDGE MXN10

W2023 / $899 / www.busisoft.com.au

Fronted by the excellent StreamMagic app, this little Cambridge streamer is a pocket rocket that can bring smarts to any existing system.

BLUESOUND NODE

E2021-2 / $999 / bluesound.com.au

Plug into an existing hi-fi to add all the abilities of Bluesound streaming and multiroom operation under the excellent BluOS app.

VOLUMIO RIVO

E2023 / $1799 / www.capisco.com.au

An Italian-made transport you plug into a DAC to enjoy myriad streaming options under Volumio's well-proven software control.

LUMIN U2 MINI

W2021 / $3590 / www.audiomagic.com.au

The U1 MINI won our award, now updated to the U2 MINI, each around half the price of the non-Mini version, yet the performance is still magical.

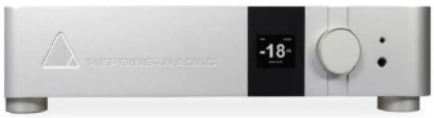
NAIM UNITI ATOM HE

W2022 / $TBA / www.westan.com.au

Catering to headphone lovers while doubling as a top-quality streaming preamp. Naim is now with Westan distribution; we await pricing.

MERGING +PLAYER+POWER

W2023 / $34,285 / absolutehiend.com



Reviewed with the +PLAYER name indicating its streaming abilities, and the +POWER external supply, simply the ultimate in streaming.

DACs

DACs can provide an upgrade for any digital source, and these days many come with a volume control so they can double as a digital-only preamp, directly driving power amps and speakers. Look for compatibility with the file types you own, along with the right set of connections that you'll need for your current – and possible future – components.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO DACMAGIC 200M

W2022 / $1099 / www.busisoft.com.au

A half-size rocket of a performer, able to be used as a DAC, a headphone amp, or even as a preamp for a whole digital system thanks to being switchable to variable output.

MUSICAL FIDELITY MX-DAC

W2023 / $1525 / audiomarketing.com.au

Five inputs, high-quality conversion, and excellent visual feedback as well, and currently on special offer. If you want still higher quality, check out the $4200 M6X DAC, an EISA winner.

WEISS DAC502

W2022 / $17,500 / soundgallery.com.au

Spectacularly musical, invisible indeed to the music passing through, the DAC502 is both functionally-packed and one of the best DACs we've ever heard, at any price.

CD players

The day of the compact disc may be done, declining under the pincer movement of streaming on one side and the resurgence of vinyl on the other. Yet a flood of secondhand CDs makes this one of the cheapest ways to collect music, and CD replay delivers an assured standard of non-compressed music, magnificent with a good player through a fine system.

ROTEL CD11 TRIBUTE

W2022 / $749 / www.rotel.com.au

Tuning begun by one sound guru and finished by another, released as a 'tribute', and now coming in a MkII version. It's a fine way to prolong your CD listening experience.

MARANTZ CD 50n

W2024 / $3200 / www.marantz.com.au

CD playback along with networking for HEOS streaming and other smart ways all goes to make the CD 50n a versatile digital playback unit especially in combination with 'dumb' amplifiers.

MARK LEVINSON NO. 5101

W2022 / $9999 / www.ambertech.com.au

Impressive CD/SACD playback combines with fine DAC abilities for digital inputs and network streaming: a complete digital playback system.

dCS ROSSINI APEX

W2023 / $49,995 / advanceaudio.com.au

High-end UK CD player for the new as well as the old — a full digital player, streamer and preamplifier at the highest levels of technology.

In-ear headphones

In-ear 'phones offer convenience of size, and the best of them can deliver beautiful music, though also crucial are ease of use and battery life, especially with true wireless buds. Bear in mind that their enclosed position makes them more dangerous to your hearing than over-ears or speakers when used at high volumes. Here are our current award-winners.

NURALOOP

W2021 / $249 / www.nurasound.com

Nura's personal sound has now been bought by Denon; run-out stock will be your last chance to get a Nuraloop. But you might get a bargain!

SONY WF-1000XM4

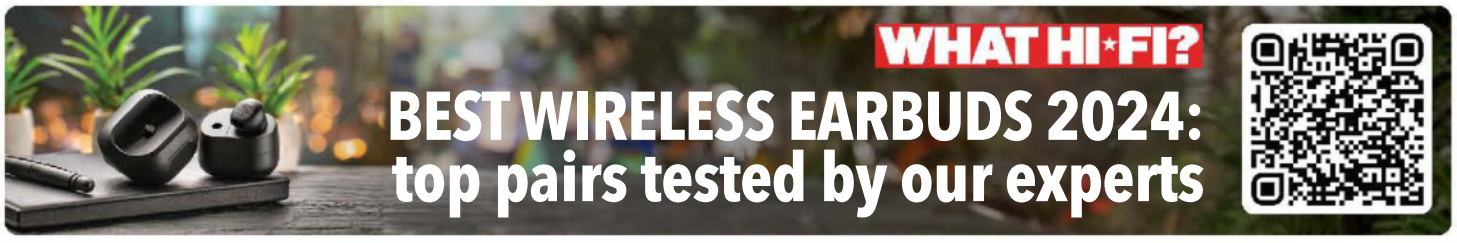
W2022 / $419 / www.sony.com.au

Officially $419 but often lower now the newer XM5s are out, so the price might sway you to the still excellent control, comfort, ANC, and audio quality of these wireless buds.

SENNHEISER IE 300

W2022 / $479.95 / sennheiser-hearing.com

The IE 300s prove Sennheiser's ability to deliver an impressively natural sound balance even from buds so small and neatly flush-fitting. Pricey, but on special for $409 as we go to press.



On/over-ear headphones

Every model listed here has won a Sound+Image award – but consider also what functions you need, as well as the prices. Open-backed models can have a thrilling airy sound that closed models can't match, while cables often beat Bluetooth for best sound. But for commuting or long distance, wireless noise-cancellers bring an isolation worth paying for.

WIRED MODELS

SENNHEISER HD 560S

W2021 / $320 / sennheiser-hearing.com

These open-backed home headphones demonstrate what Sennheiser does best — natural and high-value shining sound, a reminder of the performance headstart granted by cable rather than Bluetooth.

SENNHEISER HD 660S

W2019 / $849 / sennheiser-hearing.com

The 660 S2 is now out, $949 but currently on special at $729, which makes the end-of-line original less attractive at not much less on the street. Either open-backed model delivers tunes as if piped fresh from the studio.

BEYERDYNAMIC AMIRON HOME

W2020 / $899 / www.beyerdynamic.com.au

Open headphones which deliver endless clarity and delight when used at home driven by a good headphone amplifier (such as beyerdynamic's own!) able to drive their 250-ohm load.

STAX SR-L500 MK2

W2022 / $1370 / audiomarketing.com.au

A relatively-affordable entry to Stax electrostatic sound, the latest version of the classic Lambda earspeakers thrill with clarity and purity. A driver is required; we reviewed them paired with the $2300 SRM-400S.

STAX SRX-9000

W2022 / $10,620 / audiomarketing.com.au

The new Stax flagship should come with a warning: once heard, there is no forgetting their impeccable electrostatic sound. A driver is required, e.g the $9000 SRM-T8000.

YAMAHA YH-5000SE

W2023 / $7499 / au.yamaha.com

The SE version comes with the stand and accessories but it's the sound that wins the award, Yamaha reviving its orthodynamic (planar magnetic) heritage to deliver a rare level of neutrality and transparency from this 5000 Series flagship headphone.

WIRELESS MODELS

JBL LIVE660NC

W2022 / $249.95 / www.jbl.com.au

Well-featured, well-built and well-tempered in tone with app EQ available to tweak your preference, nothing can match JBL's Live660NC for overear wireless ANC at this price.

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-M20xBT

W2023 / $169 / www.audio-technica.com.au

A-T's junior headphones bring their punchy studio sound to the street at a bargain price – no noise-cancelling here, but excellent wireless performance, even better via cable.

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-M50xBT2

W2022 / $379 / www.audio-technica.com.au

No noise-cancelling here, but great wireless (or cabled) performance with a solid sound worthy of the heritage behind these headphones, and selling at an attractive price.

YAMAHA YH-E700A

W2022 / $399 / au.yamaha.com

Yamaha delivers a perfectly-priced pair of wireless noise-cancellers to challenge the usual brands in this sector, with high comfort and great sound under active noise-cancellation, and with aptX adaptive Bluetooth.

SENNHEISER ACCENTUM PLUS

W2024 / $399.95 / sennheiser-hearing.com

A more intuitive and natural sound from the Plus version of these wireless noise-cancellers, which are plain indeed in design, but sound like a Sennheiser should.

SONY WH-1000XM5

W2023 / $549 / www.sony.com.au

With plenty that's new and the best stuff held over, Sony continues to deliver top-value wireless noise-cancellers. Check also the previous XM4s, lest you could save a wedge by dropping back a generation.

DALI iO-6

W2021 / $799 / www.ambertech.com.au

DALI nailed the wireless NC category with its very first headphone. Built using the principles of speaker design, the iO-6 delivers thrillingly rich musical sound in a luxurious and tactile design.

APPLE AIRPODS MAX

W2022 / $899 / www.apple.com/au

A magnificently low-distortion headphone creating such wide landscapes of sound that music of every kind opens up and lives every moment, reveals every detail and nails every beat; they justify the price.

T+A SOLITAIRE T

W2024 / $2499 / www.interdyn.com.au

The T+As are gems, pricey, of course, but alone in a territory of wireless performance quality that no other pair we've heard can occupy, and also a fine listen via cable or USB-C. .

Projectors

In a dedicated or darkened room, projectors deliver bigscreen images of which even the largest TVs can only dream. From portable models of relatively low resolution to native 4K resolution, here are our current award-winners.

BENQ GV31

W2024 / $999 / www.benq.com.au

BenQ upgrades its circular projection concept with higher quality visuals but the same simplicity of set-up and battery operation.

EPSON EH-TW6250

W2023 / $2099 / www.epson.com.au

Epson's little projector comes with Android TV smarts inside and some key benefits of 4K, delivering great images at an attractive price.

BENQ TK700STi

W2022 / $2679 / www.benq.com.au

Built for big-screen gaming, this BenQ projector's smooth, bright and colourful UHD imagine is also fab for movies and TV viewing.

EPSON EH-TW7100

W2021 / $2899 / www.epson.com.au

An attractive price for a bigscreen Epson delivering the company's 3LCD colour brightness and '4K Pro UHD' imaging.

BENQ X3000i

W2023 / $3299 / www.benq.com.au

A smart projector with good gaming credentials but also great TV and movie performance, with Android TV smarts too. New X3100i is just out.

XGIMA HORIZON ULTRA

W2024 / $3499 / www.xgimi.com.au

This beautiful 4K long-throw projector delivers equally alluring images, Android streaming and a built-in harman/kardon sound system.

BENQ W4000i

W2024 / $4999 / www.benq.com.au

A theatre-level projector with first-class image quality and fast gaming which knocked 10 seconds off our Gran Turismo lap times. Handy.

EPSON EH-LS12000B

W2023 / $8999 / www.epson.com.au

The latest (and real UHD) version of Epson's 4K Pro UHD technology, with laser light source and versatility that yields an effortlessly smooth and cinematic bigscreen performance.

LEICA CINE 1 – 100

W2024 / $13,999 / leica-store.com.au/cine1

Pricey, and more to pay for the screen, but the use of Leica's glass for the lenses in this re-engineered Hisense Laser TV definitely delivers a superior product — a stunning looker too.

Systems & wireless speakers

All-in-one solutions: here are our award picks of portable Bluetooth speakers, home lifestyle wireless systems, also active speakers with a highly hi-fi sound along with active and/or wireless convenience. These are thoroughly modern music systems, often loaded with tech for streaming and/or multiroom operation under app control from phone and tablet.

JBL FLIP 6

E2022-3 / $169.95 / www.jbl.com.au

It's hard to go past JBL for top portable Bluetooth performance: the Flip 6 has impressive sound for the size, waterproofing too. Not hi-fi, of course, but good on the go.

JBL XTREME 3

W2022 / $399.95 / www.jbl.com.au

With a bottle opener on the strap, the outdoor nature of the Xtreme 3 seems assured. But this is no doof-doof box: we were impressed by well-proportioned stereo sound at home or away.

RUARK R2 MK4

W2023 / $899 / www.synergyaudio.com

Modern streaming options plus radio make this tabletop Ruark a powerful alternative to less attractive modern wireless speakers.

RUARK R3

W2022 / $1299 / www.synergyaudio.com

Simultaneously classic and modern in its style and abilities, Ruark's R3 proves a lovely compact system for CD, radio and streaming.

DENON CEOL N11DAB

W2022 / $1499 / www.denon.com.au

Craic agus ceol is exactly what Denon's all-in-one system delivers, loaded as it is with full streaming abilities in addition to more traditional inputs, plus CD and radio playback.

BOWERS & WILKINS FORMATION WEDGE

W2021 / $1599 / bowerswilkins.com/en-au

Despite offering zero physical inputs, the Formation Wedge is an undoubtedly premium performer in the wireless speaker space, with real visual style and luxuriously expansive sound.

KLIPSCH THE FIVES

W2022 / $1749 / www.klipsch.com.au

All the benefits of an active speaker solution along with profoundly solid sound whether from TV, computer, Buetooth or vinyl from these classic lookers.

KEF LSX II

W2023 / $2300 /au.kef.com

For our money the revised LSX II pushes well above the original, both when streaming and playing from the limited inputs. Enjoy true stereo performance that hits wireless hi-fi highs.

PSB SPEAKERS ALPHA IQ

W2023 / $2799 / ambertech.com.au

Small but surprising standmounts with both amplification within and extensive streaming/multiroom smarts available via the BluOS platform – which makes for a powerful combination.

SONUS FABER OMNIA

W2023 / $3495 / www.synergyaudio.com

Luxurious all-in-one from the Italians, with a warm and luscious sound and hidden browser-based options that can make it even better.

ELAC NAVIS ARB-51

W2022 / $3795 / www.synergyaudio.com

Simply magnificent when used as active speakers from their analogue inputs, delivering massive effortless music. Wireless operation is also available.

SONUS FABER DUETTO

W2024 / $6995 / www.synergyaudio.com

The Duetto speakers sound fantastic, and they nail the active streaming speaker brief in a highly consumer-friendly way, while being able to add TV and audio inputs.

Subwoofers

While many people think of subwoofers only in a home cinema context where they deliver the deepest thrills of movie soundtracks, they can be equally useful in a stereo music system, deepening the response of floorstanders as well as standmounts, and taking the load off the main speakers which can then perform to their best with the rest of the spectrum.

SVS 3000 MICRO

W2023 / $1799 / svsound.com.au

Able to get deep despite limited itself to a 10-inch cabinet, the SVS 3000 Micro is a rare small sub that performs beyond its size. Available in black, of course, but also comes in a lounge-friendly gloss white finish.

RICHTER THOR 10.6

W2019 / $1899 / www.richter.com.au

Aussie company Richter has succeeded where most have not in building a small and versatile subwoofer that doesn't sound small at all. Versatile too, with tuneable bass ports and three-mode DSP.

KRIX TEKTONIX

W2012 / $1795-$2195 / www.krix.com.au

Officially deleted but there are still some out there, Krix's 'mid-size' (11-inch cone) subwoofer is superb across either stereo-only use or multi-channel movies.

VELODYNE DB-12

HC2022 / $2299 / www.velodyne.com.au

The new-look Deep Blue 12 under Velodyne's new ownership combines a clean look with pricing that's as impressively-low as the subwoofer's clean yet deep performance levels.

KRIX VOLCANIX

HC2011 / $2395-$2995 / www.krix.com.au

Another superb Australian sub with 12-inch cone and adapted ICEPower. It works beautifully, 'sonically invisible' in large systems or with small to medium-sized standmount/bookshelf speakers.

BOWERS & WILKINS DB4S

W2021 / $2999 / bowerswilkins.com/en-au

The DB4S delivers rich, satisfying, full-bodied bass from an attractive cabinet with a single B&W Aerofoil cone, along with sophisticated app control for fine adjustment.

DYNAUDIO SUB 6

W2020 / $3699 / www.busisoft.com.au

It's not only the size of sound from Dynaudio's dual-driver compact subwoofer but also its quality that makes the Sub 6 such a marvel of low-frequency performance.

BOWERS & WILKINS DB1D

W2019 / $7900 / bowerswilkins.com/en-au

Hugely powerful — 2000W of power driving twin 12-inch cones, and accurately too, plus built-in room equalisation and the useful versatility of other settings using an iOS/Android app.

MAGICO ASUB

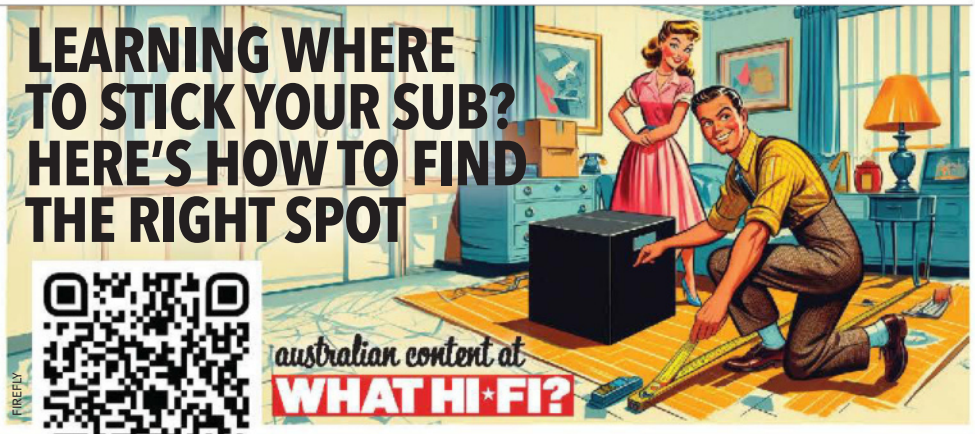
W2021 / $14,000 / www.busisoft.com.au

A phenomenally good-sounding high-performance subwoofer for both home cinema and stereo use, with astoundingly flexible computer-based room and speaker tuning.

PARADIGM SIGNATURE SUB 2

W2011 / $21,999 / www.audioactive.com.au

Hexagonal design using multiple radially-aligned high-excursion drivers to generate astounding bass (7Hz anyone?) — Paradigm's SUB2 delivers solid bass without limits.



Stereo amplifiers

Amplifiers are all about the power to drive your speakers, and different amplifiers use different technologies to do that. Also you can't just compare power ratings, because these are quoted in a myriad different ways (often overly favourably). And now amps are smart, with digital inputs and often streaming, there's much to consider. Here are our award-winning picks.

DENON PMA-900HNE

W2023 / $1699 / denon.com.au

Denon has taken its hi-fi amplifier expertise and added HEOS streaming/multiroom to the front, surprisingly for the first time. It's a hit.

ROTEL A14MKII

W2022 / $1999 / www.rotel.com.au

No streaming here other than Bluetooth and USB-B, but Rotel delivers a classic hi-fi amp with plenty of inputs and impressive power.

YAMAHA R-N1000A

W2024 / $2299 / au.yamaha.com

Well-chosen digital skills with solid power and sound in a stereo amp suitable for both music and, with its HDMI input, for TV audio, too..

NAD C 700

W2023 / $2699 / ambertech.com.au

Enjoy the big smart display, loads of streaming options thanks to the inclusion of BluOS, and of course the power for which NAD is famed.

ROKSAN ATTESSA STREAMING

W2024 / $3149 / www.interdyn.com.au

The inclusion of BluOS streaming makes this a thoroughly modern amplifier, while the basics of power and control are impressive at this price.

ADVANCE PARIS A12 CLASSIC

W2024 / $4499 / www.synergyaudio.com

We love the look, the connections are exhaustive, and the A12 Classic's valves glow softly as it makes its beautiful music.

YAMAHA R-N2000A

W2023 / $4999 / au.yamaha.com

This amp combines MusicCast streaming and app control with relatively purist modern circuitry inside Yamaha's timeless design.

PERREAUX 200iX

W2023 / $9495 / perreaux.com

It's not the rainbow choice of colours which won our award: it's the sound. The 200iX is a MOSFET powerhouse, while offering versatile inputs and both remote and app-based control.

COPLAND CTA408

W2022 / $9900 / www.audiomagic.com.au

The Copland CTA408's dynamic valve sound is complemented by stand-out performance from phono input and headphone output.

ELECTROCOMPANIET ECI 6 DX MkII

W2022 / $11,945 / audiodynamics.com.au

Norway's Electrocompaniet delivers a wildly successful combination of physical inputs, streaming, control and high-current power.

MUSICAL FIDELITY M8xi

W2021 / $13,800 / audiomarketing.com.au

More power than you'll ever need, super-low distortion, a great range of inputs, plus it sounds superb... this is serious amplification.

MARK LEVINSON N^{O} 5805

W2023 / $15,999 / ambertech.com.au

The massive No 5805 has an inate ability to deliver power, authority and scale, while at the same time painting sounds with precision.

MUSICAL FIDELITY NU-VISTA 800.2

W2024 / $22,000 / audiomarketing.com.au

Gloriously smooth and musical sound along with the power to drive any speaker on the planet: the 800.2 proved a true all-rounder.

BOULDER 866

W2021 / $26,700 / www.absolutehiend.com

A unique amplifier, with a spectacularly powerful and musical performance and astounding control over bass frequencies.

DAN D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS PROGRESSION INTEGRATED

W2022 / $36,995 / advanceaudio.com.au

The base price is $36,995, with useful modular DAC and phono modules available to incorporate, but it's the gloriously effortless presentation which thrills.

Pre-power amplifiers

Separating the switching pre-amplifier from the power amplification allows both sections to perform to their best without interfering with each other. It's entirely possible to mix brands, but our recommendations here are limited to branded pairs, which are a fair promise of electrical compatibility as well as an aesthetic match. Every pair here is an award winner.

ADVANCE PARIS X-P700 / X-A220 EVO x 2

W2024 / $2299 (pre) + $2900 x 2 (power) / www.synergyaudio.com

High performance and delightful aesthetics at remarkably attractive prices for this three-box amplifier system from the French brand, new to Australia. With healthy inputs and plenty of power, this pre-power combination gets the three-box formula absolutely right.

CAMBRIDGE EDGE NQ/W

W2020 / $11,499 (pre) +$8999 (power) / www.busisoft.com.au

A thrilling combination of thoroughly modern preamp (smart, app controlled, streaming, though getting quite a price hike with new distribution) and purist stereo power amp, this pre-power pair performed magnificently.

BEL CANTO E1X DAC/CONTROL AMP & E1X STEREO AMPLIFIER

W2022 / $11,000 + $13,200 / www.absolutehiend.com

Bel Canto's DAC/control amp offers analogue and digital inputs including USB-B, plus app control, DLNA/UPnP network playback and a Roon end point, while the stereo power amplifier uses a pair of 400W Hypex Ncore modules to allow a relatively compact design yet a powerful presentation from this versatile stereo pre-power combination.

YAMAHA C-5000 / M-5000

W2020 / $12,999 + $12,999 / au.yamaha.com

Yamaha's relatively recent nourishing of its two-channel audio ranges reaches its zenith with the 5000 Series from which this powerfully musical pre-power pairing delivers what Yamaha calls 'True Sound', exceptionally transparent, dripping with the emotion of original performances across any genre.

MCINTOSH C53 / MC462

W2021 / $15,995 (pre) + $22,495 (power) / www.synergyaudio.com

An amplification pair that has no audible noise at all for low to normal listening levels, but which can also kick serious arse — because it's a McIntosh pre-power. Spending mere review time with this pair, let alone owning them, delivered absolute bliss throughout long extending listening sessions.

CLASSÉ DELTA PRE & STEREO

W2022/ $16,990 (pre) +$19,990 (power) / www.classeaudio.com

The Canadian brand was revived by building at Japan's famous Shirikawa Audio Works, devliering this attractive and well-featured preamp along with the fins and needles of the stereo power amp that delivers 2 x 250W of highly musical power into 8 ohms, 500W into 4 ohms.

GRYPHON ESSENCE PREAMPLIFIER / STEREO

W2022 / $26,995 (pre) + $34,995 (power) / www.advanceaudio.com.au

Michi ('righteous way' in Japanese) is to Rotel as Lexus is to Toyota, a brand that delivers something above. And this pre-power combo proved simply superb. If the Michis were actual musicians, as they so often sounded to be, we would be on our feet calling for an encore.

MCINTOSH C12000/MC3500 MKII

W2023 / $29,990 + $59,990 / www.synergyaudio.com

Take two separate preamplifier boxes ($29,990 the pair), add two mono power amps based on the designs that powered the PA at, er, Woodstock ($59,990 the pair) and the result is pure, simple, unadulterated music: not 'bright' or 'hard' or 'soft' or 'warm', just entirely natural. It's not a bad set of kit to look at, either.

Power amplifiers

Sometimes, if you already have a preamplifier, or indeed a DAC which can operate as a preamplifier, then you need only add a standalone power amplifier — mono, stereo, or even multichannel — to drive your speakers to their best.

ADCOM GFA-555se

W2023 / $2999 / ngpdistribution.com.au

Adcom has taken awards two years running, even though these are old-school power amps. They just punch so far above their weight.

HALCRO ECLIPSE STEREO

W2024 / $69,990 / halcro.com

The stereo Halcro Eclipse is an object lesson in the importance of state-of-the-art amplification in an audio chain, yet also an audio work of art in itself. This is Australian hi-fi design at its best.

HALCRO ECLIPSE MONO x 2

W2020 / $91,000 / halcro.com

The stereo version of the Eclipse is now out (left) but the mono Aussie Halcros remain a pinnacle of amplification, staggeringly real things of beauty in every way.

Soundbars

Times were when we wouldn't recommend soundbars at all — they were a compromise for those who couldn't fit in real speakers. But the best of the breed surprise and delight us with movie (and less commonly musical) performance.

YAMAHA SR-C30A

W2023 / $399 / au.yamaha.com

A stronger performance than the price might suggest, and a sub included too, thanks to Yamaha's long experience with soundbars.

YAMAHA SR-B40A

W2024 / $645 / au.yamaha.com

Yamaha makes some daft claims for this bar+sub combo, but at heart it's a solid 2.1-channel bar with Atmos compatibility but no actual surround.

POLK MAGNIFI MINI AX

W2023 / $779 / au.polkaudio.com

This **strange lozenge of a soundbar works** excellently with a tall subwoofer to achieve a big rounded sound for movies and even music.

BOWERS & WILKINS PANORAMA 3

W2023 / $1199 / bowerswilkins.com

Less flashy than its predecessors but also far cheaper, the Panorama 3 uses the company's speaker skills to deliver an excellent soundbar.

YAMAHA TRUE X SYSTEM

W2024/ $1599 / au.yamaha.com

Genuine 4.1.2-channel from soundbar, subwoofer and a pair of satellite rears which can work as separate wireless speakers.

SAMSUNG HW-S800B S SERIES

W2023 / $1999 / www.samsung.com.au

Samsung has led in high-quality soundbars for a decade; the S Series shrinks their size yet still achieves an excellent all-round performance.

JBL BAR 1300

W2023 / $1999 / www.jbl.com.au

With the secret weapon of removable ends that become wireless rears or standalones, JBL finally delivers a soundbar worthy of its name.

SENNHEISER AMBEO MAX

W2023 / $3999 / sennheiser-hearing.com

Officially $3999 but often far cheaper, making this massive and massive-sounding bar-only solution better value than the lower models.

Standmount loudspeakers

The ultimate sound requires the ultimate speakers — and here are those that have impressed us above all others to win our Sound+Image awards. Standmounters are not only for small spaces: they often achieve a tighter cleaner sound that some prefer to floorstanders, whatever the room. Budget for proper speaker stands if you can. For wireless speakers, see p90.

TRIANGLE BOREA BR03

W2022 / $900 / audiomarketing.com.au

Designed in France, Triangle's BR03 speakers prove impressive contenders with usefully high sensitivity to coax additional power from partnering amplifiers. Their tone is sweet and pure, with bass extension impressive for the cabinet size.

POLK RESERVE R200

W2022 / $1199 / au.polkaudio.com

The Reserve R200 set our medium listening room on fire, such that we couldn't believe the price when they told us. Substantial in size for the money, with Polk's Pinnacle tweeter and new X-Port to the rear, they relished being turned up and driven with real power.

RICHTER MERLIN S6

W2020 / $1199 / www.richter.com.au

Richter's Series 6 standmounts are better than ever — more efficient, more user-friendly, and sounding fine indeed, a tribute to the Australian design team delivering the new Richter Series 6.

PMC PRODIGY1

W2024 / $2399 / interdyn.com.au

PMC successfully brings its technology and signature sound to a far more affordable level with this pair of plain-looking but stunning-sounding standmounts — informative but never at the expense of entertainment; systematic, yes, but never soulless.

REVIVAL AUDIO ATALANTE 3

W2023 / $4300 / audiomarketing.com.au

A new French brand's first standmount took this year's Editor's Choice award for their astounding soundstaging in combination with truth of tone. And they're pleasingly large in size.

DELLICHORD FR6

W2024 / $4995 / dellichord.com.au

The best thing about the FR6 speakers is not their isobaric complexity (with an extra internal driver and rear passive radiator), it's the simple pleasure of listening to their beautiful music.

MARCH AUDIO SOINTUVA WG

W2023 / $6000 / marchaudio.com

From Albany, WA, come these solid and beautiful standmounts that leverage the latest driver tech for some thrilling results that had our listening rooms singing with beauty yet kicking serious arse.

HARBETH COMPACT 7ES-3 XD

W2022 / $7000 / www.audiomagic.com.au

The Harbeths look suitable classic (especially with dark grilles in place) yet their sound easily competes with modern designs, with miraculous midrange, and impressive bass for their 52cm size.

SERHAN SWIFT Mu2 MKII

W2024 / $7500 / www.serhanswift.com

Music just seems to flow effortlessly from the Australian desinged and built mμ2 Mk ll, the original model tweaked in significant ways to make this fine standmount still more involving.

KRIX ESOTERIX ALTUM

W2018 / $8495 / www.krix.com.au

South Australia's Krix knows a thing or two about horns, and the waveguide on their stereo standmounts delivers outstanding imaging and high-end performance also giving an impressively extended bass.

BOWERS & WILKINS 805 D4

W2022 / $14,900 / bowerswilkins.com

With the latest D4 series the 805 standmounters finally get the reverse-wrap cabinet treatment, lifting them above their able-enough predecessors and living up to the hype despite a price hike.

YAMAHA NS-5000

W2018 / $19,999 / au.yamaha.com

Another large standmount whch summons up the classic hi-fi era in an all-new design, Yamaha's NS-5000 heralded the company's two-channel revival with fine performance.

Floorstanding loudspeakers

Floorstanders often don't take up any more space than standmount speakers on their stands, yet the extra cabinet volume and drivers can deliver more energy to the room, and more depth. At the higher prices you're not only getting state-of-the-art sound and technology, but also objects of true beauty, often bringing artisan craftsmanship to your home.

RICHTER HARLEQUIN S6

W2021 / $1999 / www.richter.com.au

The Series 6 Aussie-designed Harlequins deliver Richter's signature size and quality of sound with precision and accuracy from a stylish and usefully compact floorstander; outstanding value.

POLK SIGNATURE ELITE ES60

W2023 / $2799 / au.polk.com

We had to double-check the price-tag here, such is the value on offer from Polk's highly musical towers, and with Polk's latest downfiring 'Power Port' technology, and we're currently seeing them even cheaper...

RICHTER WIZARD S6PLUS

W2024 / $2899 / www.richter.com.au

The latest and definitely greatest version of Richter's legendary Wizard — now cleaner, tighter and more extended bass, enhanced midrange accuracy, and sweeter yet more lively highs. Stunners.

DALI OBERON 9

W2022 / $3999 / www.ambertech.com.au

The newest and largest in the Oberon range at 117cm tall, the Nines (with nine-inch bass drivers) sound beautifully balanced, with well-extended bass and attractive room appeal.

ELAC VELA FS 407

W2023 / $7995 / www.synergyaudio.com

Beautiful tower speakers with Elac's latest JET tweeters and 'crystal membrane' cones; it's a receipe for success with overall a wonderfully smooth and engaging sonic performance.

BOWERS & WILKINS 703 S3

E2023 / $8500 / bowerswilkins.com/en-au

That tweeter-on-top makes a notable improvement in clarity while 800 D4 Series tech trickles down to these more affordable and wonderfully musical floorstanders. from the company's middle range.

REVEL PERFORMA^{Be} F226BE

W2022 / $14,999 / ambertech.com.au

Revel's speakers (see also below) have won awards three years out of four, this latest being from its beryllium-tweetered Performa^{Be} range, with shining highs passing to dazzling midrange and solid bass delivery.

PARADIGM FOUNDER 120H

E2022/3 / $15,999 / audioactive.com.au

We've reviewed (and loved) the standmount 40B from this series, but EISA awarded the top 120H, a 5-driver 3-way floorstander with its three woofers powered by a separate DSP-controlled 1000W amp. We say 'woof'.

VIVID AUDIO KAYA 25

W2021 / $16,950 / www.avation.com.au

Standing like modern sculptures of sound, the junior floorstander of Vivid's Kaya range exploits the company's driver expertise and curved cabinets all in the service of sound, the Kaya 25s fully energising a room.

PSB SYNCHRONY T800

W2024 / $18,999 / ambertech.com.au

A masterpiece from Canada's Paul Barton: we would rate these Synchrony T800 loudspeakers among the very best-sounding we have ever heard, irrespective of price. At their actual price, it's just no contest.

BOWERS & WILKINS 804 D4

W2023 / $22,900 / bowerswilkins.com/en-au

The new 800 Series Diamond's entry-level floorstanders demonstrate how that signature Bowers & Wilkins sound has been improved still further, with more realism, greater purity – and stunning looks.

WILSON SABRINAX

W2022 / $34,995 / advanceaudio.com.au

Wilson manages to deliver its trademark sound even in this smaller model, now with more X material. Prepare to be bewitched by their realism.

Vinyl

Every model listed here has won a Sound+Image award, indicating top value at its price – but consider also what functions you need, such as a built-in phono stage, perhaps. Plan well, and the black stuff will bewitch you with its charms...

AUDIO-TECHNICA SOUND BURGER

W2023 / $429 / audiotechnica.com.au

A revamp of the 1982 original, last year in a red special edition, now in black, white and yellow: the Sound Burger is a lightweight portable battery-powered turntable, yet is no toy, playing vinyl well and respectfully! But a full deck might be nice for home.

JBL SPINNER BT

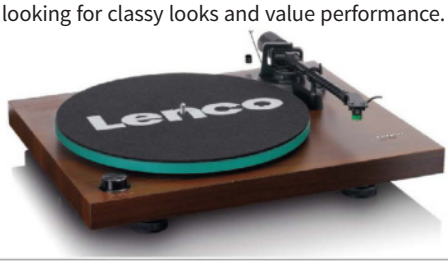
W2024 / $649.95 / www.jbl.com.au

The phono output is the best quality here, the line-level output the most versatile, and Bluetooth wireless playback the most fun. Solid performance and a cool aesthetic.

LENCO LBT-225

W2024 / $699 / audacityaustralia.com.au

With four paths to playback and impressive build & features at the price, this Lenco will suit those looking for classy looks and value performance.



AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-LPW50BP

W2022 / $749 / audio-technica.com.au

With its piano-gloss finish and no-frills focus on sound (though it does have a phono stage), this is yet another A-T winner.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO ALVA ST

W2023 / $1199 / www.busisoft.com.au

With a built-in phono stage and the ability to play via Bluetooth, the Alva ST offers versatility as well as solid replay via the rich-sounding Audio-Technica cartridge.

JBL TT350 CLASSIC

W2024 / $1999 / www.ambertech.com.au

Few extras on this direct-drive first-ever turntable from JBL, but a clarity of vinyl sound that ticks all the boxes for speed, tone and straightforward wonderful music.

MO-FI ELECTRONICS STUDIODECK+

W2021 / $2999 / www.synergyaudio.com

From the vinyl curators Mo-Fi, the StudioDeck+ charmed us from its looks and build to its sonic performance. This price is without cartridge.

PRO-JECT X2 B + PHONO BOX S3 B

W2023 / $2699+$659 / projectaudio.com.au

It's not just that this turntable uses a balanced connection (and so requires this balanced phono stage), it's an outstanding MC cartridge, top turntable, and conversion too.

DENON DP-3000NE

W2024 / $2999 / www.synergyaudio.com

Showing the rise of direct drive at higher levels, Denon's turntable is built like a battleship and delivers rock-solid stability for your choice of (not-included) cartridge.

HOLBO MKII AIRBEARING TURNTABLE

W2023 / $12,000 / audiomarketing.com.au

Pump up the volume! An airborne platter and linear-tracking tonearm deliver effortless insight. This price is without cartridge.

YAMAHA GT-5000

W2021 / $12,999 / au.yamaha.com

Yamaha revists its hi-fi roots with the 'Giant & Tremendous' GT-5000 from its 5000 Series of stereo hi-fi. A glorious turntable.

MARK LEVINSON No. 5105

W2022 / $13,999 / ambertech.com.au

This price includes a fitted moving-coil cartridge, which delivered magic from this superbly-engineered turntable.

THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION

Immerse yourself into every scene with the Leica Cine 1 – the discreet solution to big-screen TV viewing and home cinema that combines Leica's best-in-class precision optics with cutting-edge laser technology for an unparalleled movie experience.

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

www.leica-camera.com/cinema-tv

The use of an ALR screen for ultra-short distance projectors is recommended. Screen sold separately.

Image simulated for illustrative purposes.

Leica

YAMAHA

Make Waves

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

AMPLIFIER OF THE YEAR UNDER $2,500

R-N1000A

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

SOUNDBAR OF THE YEAR OVER $1,000

TRUE X SYSTEM

WINNER 2024 SOUND IMAGE AWARDS

SOUNDBAR OF THE YEAR UNDER $1,000

SR-B40A